

InterKnight Press Publications

F O R E V E R

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Tales from FORKNI-L and FKFIG-L
Issue #4

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NET

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Issue #4

August, 1995
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction	
by Valery King	iv
The Joke	
by Margaret Newman	1
Top 10 Reasons Why Nicholaah is <i>Not</i> a Wimp	
by Sharon Scott & Margaret Newman	4
LaCroix Takes The Wheel	
by Diane Trap	5
A Worse Curse Than Vampirism	
by Lynne Levine	10
Car Trouble	
by Sharon Himmanen	11
One of Our Own	
by Siobhan	15
"You Are Old, Lucien LaCroix"	
by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons	38
None so Blind	
by Diane Trap	39
Hill of Crows	
by M. E. Orive	47
LucienLaCwocky	
by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons	52
In the Black	
by Susan M. Garrett	53
<i>A CHRISTMAS TRYPTICH</i>	54
'Twas a Nightie for Christmas	
by Pamela Rush	55
Sidney vs. Treezilla	
by Susan M. Garrett	65
Twelfth Night	
by Pamela Rush	75
A More Permanent Atch-Ee-Double Hockey Sticks	
by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons	88
Why Nick Became a Police Officer and Not an Academic Again, or Forever Python: The Bruces	
by Don Basingthwaite	89

Memories	
by Lynne Levine	93
The Clearing	
by Margaret Newman	97
Nicholas and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Night	
by Diane Echelbarger	101
Experiment	
by Sharon S. Scott	105
How the West <i>Wasn't</i> Won	
<i>or, "I'm sorry, could you explain that 'Code' thing to me again?"</i>	
by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons	108
Walk On By	
by Susan M. Garrett	109
Partners of the Month: The Unseen Scenes	
by Pamela Rush	111
What I Learned from "Near Death"	
by Pamela Rush	122
Those Left Behind	
by Diane Trap	123
To My Dearest Children, Who Have Had a Close Call	
by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons	128
Justice, Being Blind	
by Susan M. Garrett	129
About the Authors (and Staff)	203

ASCII art by Allen Braunsdorf: p.100

Editor's Introduction

by Valery King

Welcome, as we are about to start our THIRD season. This is very exciting, considering when we started this zine -- and when Jaye started the mailing lists that these stories and poems are drawn from -- we had no idea there was even going to be a second season!

And what a strange history this show has! What began life as an unsold pilot with Rick Springfield metamorphosed a few years later into a late-night CBS *Crimetime After Primetime* program. Dropped (along with all the other *Crimetime* entries) when CBS hired David Letterman away from NBC, *Forever Knight* rose from the dead into syndication. After a year in syndication, in its third season the show has acquired a new partner -- USA Network -- and will be seen twice a week now on cable, as well! The advantage to this cable deal is that there will be, in addition to the showing on local stations at whatever hour and day they decide, a common day and time throughout the nation on the cable network that reaches more U.S. homes than any other. We (and the rest of the nation) will know where to find it, and when. And there will be some *promotion* as well, on USA and possibly on her offspring, the SciFi Channel. Personally, I won't mind at all see a commercial if it is for *Forever Knight*.

Cast changes will give us a very different show than we've been used to. After the first season, we lost Gary Farmer (Captain Stonetree). This year we will lose three -- John Kapelos (Schanke), Deborah Duchene (Janette), and Natsuko Ohama (Captain Cohen) will, sadly, be moving on. I'll certainly miss all of them, and will be keeping my eye out for their new projects. And I'll be anxiously awaiting the appearance of three new characters: Nick's new partner, a female rookie named Tracy Vetter played by Lisa Ryder; a new "studly" vampire, Vachon (Ben Bass), and the third captain in as many seasons, played by character actor Blu Mankuma. We'll see how they shake down in September.

The lists, too, have grown and changed. Not only is there a list for discussion (FORKNI-L, with close to 700 members!), and one for fiction (FKFIC-L), but since we had new shows to talk about this year for the first time a brand new list debuted to prevent listmembers who hadn't seen an episode yet from being "spoiled" about the details while allowing others to discuss it (FKSPOILR). And some of our most amusing fluff has come from there, oddly enough. Instructions for subscribing to these Internet mailing lists are included at the end of this article.

FKFIC-L has grown so much, so fast, that it's really hard to keep up with the new talent. We're happy to include some of them in this issue. Maria Orive's haunting story "Hill of Crows" features a pre-vampiric LaCroix. Diane Echelbarger brings us a delightful parody of a very popular children's book with "Nicholas and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Night;" I only wish we could have included illustrations! Two of Diane Trap's three stories are on the lighter side -- imagine trying to teach LaCroix how to drive ("LaCroix Takes the Wheel") or dealing with his frustration over a children's book ("None So Blind") -- and her third features Janette and her handsome vampire bartender, Miklos ("Those Left Behind").

Sharon Himmanen also brings us a story with automobiles, showcasing Nick's beloved Caddy in "Car Trouble." Siobahn's given us a real, live Wild West flashback, and what may be Nick's earliest incarnation as a lawman in "One of Our Own" -- as well as a chilling reappearance of the vampire world's equivalent of law enforcement to deal with a young cop who's gotten too close. And while we don't do a lot of poetry around here, Celeste Hotaling-Lyons' rhymes were too much fun to pass up! A veteran fanfic writer/editor/publisher in other fandoms, we're pleased that FK fandom has attracted

Celeste -- and her poems!

It occurs to me, however, that some "terminology" Celeste uses in one of her poems ("LucienLaCwocky") is unique to the list and deserves some explanation. These are the so-called "factions" which tend to confuse newcomers. Some of the listmembers find themselves drawn more to one character than another, and have come up with terms to describe themselves. "Knighties" are true to Nick; "Natpackers" to Natalie; "Ravens" and "Ravenettes" are followers of Janette. These are easy to figure out. Not so easy: "FoD" (pronounced "food") stands for Friends of Don (Schanke); and then there are the "Cousins" who follow LaCroix. (This last has a long story behind it, but it shakes down to a good-natured practical joke played by two listmembers on another, inspiring her to remark that they were both so "evil" they must be related; these two LaCroix fans then declared themselves Cousins and began signing their posts this way -- and it stuck.) And if you want to participate in the fun but don't favor one character over another you can be a "Die-Hard."

Let me emphasize that this behavior is all good-natured and done in fun. No one is "forced" to choose a faction, there are no rules or initiations. You simply "declare" your affiliation on-list if you feel like it, and go ahead and change your mind a few times if it suits you. Any teasing is done friend-to-friend and actually falls into the realm of fiction. What faction am I? Frankly, despite some personal involvement in the genesis of the "cousin" business (I provided the chocolate frogs -- I did mention that it's a long story) I've never felt any need to join one, and no one has ever tried to make me.

While we're pleased to showcase some new talent, we haven't forgotten old friends. Susan Garrett is back with us, giving us several very different types of stories. "Justice, Being Blind" puts Nick in a terrible dilemma when a promising young artist is deliberately blinded before he can fulfil that promise. On a lighter note, Nat gets a remodeling surprise in "In the Black," and "Sidney vs. Treezilla" is a lovely Christmas offering featuring Natalie's cat and a visit from someone who is definitely NOT Santa Claus. Pam Rush treats us to *two* Christmas stories that had me almost rolling on the floor with laughter (" 'Twas a Nightie for Christmas" and its sequel "Twelfth Night"). Sharon Scott details a rather unique "Experiment." Margaret Newman gives us a glimpse of family fun in "The Joke" (both the Schanke and the vampire families), and a few moments of nostalgia for Nick and LaCroix ("The Clearing"); and then she and Scottie give us a "point-counterpoint" exploration of the "Top 10 Reasons Why Nicholaah is Not a Wimp!"

We have a guideline here at Forever Net about not printing cross-universe stories, but we've made an exception for Don Bassingthwaite (actually, we always seem to be making exceptions for Don; he's just that kinda guy). Don has broken into the professional writing field, with two books published to date in the White Wolf gaming universe (way to go, Don!). Readers who've been with us before may remember the truly hysterical "Dairy Blossoms" from FN#1, and the truly strange "Schanke Cleans His Plate" from the same issue, as well as a more serious Schanke story in issue #2. He's back in this issue to explain "Why Nick Became a Police Officer and Not an Academic Again, or Forever Python: the Bruces." We're very happy to have him with us.

Our "veterans" also have given us several stories that are launched directly from specific episodes. Lynne Levine takes us back to season one with a story of the haunted memories of the reporter from *Unreality TV* in "Memories." Susan Garrett's "Walk On By" goes into what might have happened after *Be My Valentine* if LaCroix decided to test how well his hypnotism worked. Finally, Pam Rush (probably the biggest Don Schanke/John Kapelos fan on the lists) has rescued some hysterical stuff from the "cutting room floor" in "*Partners of the Month: the Unseen Scenes.*"

And for the people who have complained about the lack of artwork in Forever Net: check out page 100. FN's guidelines allow publishing only things taken from the two (now three) Internet mailing lists dedicated to *Forever Knight*, which would make it seemingly impossible to include any art since none

Forever Net #4

appears on line. But Allen Braunsdorf, the creative talent who designed our cover logo (electronically, by the way) tried his hand at some "ASCII art" (which uses characters from the computer keyboard to create pictures and designs) and managed to slip a version of the show's opening title onto FORKNI-L. That qualified it for inclusion in the zine, and I'm glad to be able to print it.

Well, here you have it. The authors and I always welcome comments. E-mail addresses are provided at the end of the zine, or mail to the post office box and I shall pass comments along.

Enjoy your visit to the world of *Forever Knight*!

Valery King
editor
(kingv@ccmail.orst.edu,
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July 31, 1995

How to subscribe to the Internet Forever Knight mailing lists (FORKNI-L, FKFIC-L, FKSPOILR)

The FORKNI-L, FKFIC-L and FKSPOILR mailing lists are maintained by an automatic system on BITNET called the *listserv*. The listserv is a software program that handles tasks such as membership additions, removals, and requests for archived material.

Send subscription requests, removal requests, etc. for these lists to `LISTSERV@PSUVM.PSU.EDU` on Internet (BITNET users send to `LISTSERV@PSUVM`). When sending commands to the listserv, leave the subject line blank, and don't include punctuation, a signature, or other non-command text in your message. When sending multiple commands in a single mail file, each command must be on a separate line, with no blank lines between commands.

To subscribe, send this command to the listserv:

```
SUBSCRIBE listname your_name
```

For example, if Nick decides to join FORKNI-L, he might send the following message:

```
SUBSCRIBE FORKNI-L Nicholas Knight
```

You should receive an automatic message from listserv within 24 hours, confirming your subscription to the list, and a message from the listowner with all kinds of information about the list. After that, to post to FORKNI-L, e-mail your message to `FORKNI-L@PSUVM.PSU.EDU`. To post fiction to FKFIC-L, send your story or story part as e-mail to `FKFIC-L@PSUVM.PSU.EDU`. The subject line should contain a short version of the story's name (or the full name, if it's short enough), and, if a multi-part story, the part number (for example, the third part of my 20 part story might be `My Story 03/20`). To discuss new episodes within two weeks of the first satellite feed of that episode, send e-mail to `FKSPOILR@PSUVM.PSU.EDU`; blank lines in the message are NOT necessary, but you must put `SPOILER: Episode Name` as the subject. The listserv software is set up so that you must be subscribed to one of the lists before you can post your message there.

If your Internet access is through a commercial service, contact that service's helpline or helpfiles for information on subscribing to Internet lists through them.

The Joke

by Margaret Newman

"Myra!" Don cried when he saw what Myra was serving for supper. Vegetable lasagna, something that looked like tofu and peas, salad that had been sprouts and other things he couldn't -- and didn't want to -- name. "You're trying to kill me, aren't you? You can't expect me to eat this -- this -- crap!"

"Donald, you are going to eat every bite I put on your plate," she replied with the "don't mess with me" voice. Jenny ducked her head, grinning.

"I gotta work all night, it's been raining for three days, and -- and --" He stopped, seeing her eyes narrowed at him. One hand on her hip, one hand jiggling a serving spoon threateningly. "Okay, okay."

Several tortured minutes went by as Myra watched Don take servings from each dish. She continued to watch him, making sure he took a bite. Finally, she turned away and checked on dessert. Jenny glanced up at her father, her eyes sparkling. She took a drink of her glass of milk, and nodded at his own glass of milk.

Don winked at his daughter, taking a gulping drink of what turned out to be 1% milk. He winced, forcing himself to swallow. Jenny started to giggle, but quickly caught herself. Mommy's and Daddy's constant food argument was a source of amusement for her. Whenever Daddy was gone to work or off with his friends, Mommy got out her chocolate supply.

"Mmmmm, good." Don choked. He shoved in a few more bites of the various things -- garbage as far as he was concerned -- on his plates. Another drink of the watery milk. Myra eyed her husband's progress from the kitchen counter. She was having a tofu shake for supper.

"Gee, Daddy. I have a funny joke to tell you." Jenny watched as he filled up his mouth again. "I heard it at school."

"Whhmmmmss?" Don waved his fork in the air, wiggling his eyebrows.

"What do you say to a newly made vampire?" Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

Myra made a slight choking noise, and turned away. Don tried to swallow, but the health food mass in his mouth seemed to swell in size. His watered milk glass was empty.

"Hhmm?" He replied, putting his napkin to his mouth. Oh, god . . .

"Coagulations!!!" Jenny shouted, bouncing in her seat. Mommy burst out laughing, grabbing the counter for support.

Don snorted. It was quite an uncomfortable feeling. His stomach jiggled, his throat constricted. It wasn't that funny of a joke. It was just the way Jenny told it, and her laughter afterwards. Myra was cracking up, practically holding onto the counter for dear life. He tried to swallow again, but it was hopeless. That was when he blew. Like a volcano. All over the kitchen table. Jenny jumped out of her seat with a high pitched shriek. Myra crumpled to the floor, her face a brilliant red, tears streaming down her face.

"Oh, Donny!" Myra cried.

"Man oh man oh man!" Don lunged for the fridge, grabbed a beer, and ran for the bathroom.

"I guess I better not tell jokes when Daddy's mouth is full." Jenny sighed, sitting on the floor by her mother.

"No." Myra hiccuped. "It gets him every time."

* * *

"You feeling okay, Schank?" Nick asked as he watched his partner drop two tablets of Alka-Seltzer into a cup of water.

"Yeah, fine, wonderful." Don sighed, waited a second, and drank the contents of the paper cup down. The beer hadn't helped. This was his second dose of Alka-Seltzer. Just the thought of tofu or vegetable lasagna sent him running for the restroom.

"You want a doughnut or something?" Nick picked up a file, and stood. Schanke glared at him from across their desks. "Hey, I was just asking."

"Hi, guys." Natalie walked over to them, setting her briefcase on Nick's desk. "The test results on the Dwyer case have been delayed. I should have them for you by tomorrow."

"Damn!" Schanke shook his head.

"You know, you don't look so good." Nat frowned at him. "Do you have the flu?"

"No." Don crumpled the cup, and tossed it into the waste basket. "Myra's cooking is going to kill me. Either that or Jenny telling jokes when I've got a mouthful of the vile stuff."

"Jenny tells jokes when you're eating?" Natalie laughed, glancing at Nick. Their eyes met, and they grinned.

"Are her jokes that bad?" Nick asked, standing behind Natalie. (She smelled good, something flowery, and he surreptitiously took an extra deep breath just so he could remember it later.)

"Okay, okay." Don leaned back in his chair, holding his hands up in the air. He didn't see Captain Cohen standing a few feet away, a shoulder leaning against the wall. "What do you say to a newly made vampire?"

"Oh, gosh." Natalie blinked rapidly, half turning to look up at Nick. "I don't know. What would you say, Nick?"

"Nice tan?" He replied innocently, eyes wide.

"Coagulations!" Captain Cohen said, her hand coming to rest lightly on Schanke's shoulder. It scared Don nearly out of his wits. He jumped out of the chair with a shriek. Captain Cohen managed to step out of the way of his chair which hurtled backwards. The entire precinct erupted into fits of laughter. . .

* * *

Dawn was not so far away, but Nick was not yet to safety in his loft. He had stopped at The Raven on the way home. He walked down the steps into the main level of the establishment, nodding to Miklos at the bar. The bartender was giving his domain the last few swipes before turning in for the day.

"They are in the back, Nikolah," Miklos said, nodding towards the private area. "Be careful, my friend. Her fangs are sharp tonight."

"Thank you for the warning." Nick grinned. Maybe he should have gone straight home?

"Nicholas." LaCroix looked up at the opening door. "What a pleasant surprise. Come and join us."

"He can finish this ridiculous game with you." Janette hissed, standing. She flashed Nick a furious look, and stalked over to the sidebar. Refilling her glass, her heels clicked as she walked to the cold fireplace.

"Backgammon." Nick sat down in Janette's chair. "How did you get her to play in the first place?"

"Charm, Nicholas." LaCroix said with a smile. "What brings you here so close to dawn? Or were you, perhaps, looking for companionship?"

"Oh, I don't know." Nick shrugged, idly moving a game piece around on the board. "A whim?"

"Stupid." Janette shook her head, turning from the fireplace to walk across the room.

"Janette." LaCroix purred her name. It was not a loving invitation. It was a very strong suggestion to quit pacing.

"I heard a joke today. I found it amusing." He looked over at Janette, then at LaCroix. "A rather silly joke, but it certainly has gotten laughs."

"Tell us, then." His father nodded. "Perhaps it will amuse Janette." She made a rude noise.

"What do you say to a newly made vampire?" Nick stood, tossing a black and white chip down to the backgammon board. Neither member of his audience spoke. He shrugged, walking slowly to the door. "Coagulations."

Janette growled, and toss her glass at his head. He ducked in time, slipping out the door. The sound of LaCroix's laughter followed him out of The Raven. It was a silly, idiotic joke. That was for sure. Yet it certainly got reactions out of everyone. Nick drove straight home, making it inside before the bright light of day could burn him. He smiled, remembering Schanke's reaction, as he closed the blinds.

The End

Top 10 Reasons Why Nicholaah is *Not* a Wimp

and a reply

by Sharon Scott & Margaret Newman

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. He's lasted almost 800 years. | ... yeah, running from LaCroix! |
| 2. He looks good in black. | Not as good as Nigel does! |
| 3. Schanke trusts him. | That's a plus? |
| 4. He drives a cool car. | Any twit with money can by a cool car. |
| (4a. He doesn't drive a white Ford Bronco.) | (He probably bought an Edsel.) |
| 5. He smashes through windows with great panache. | Mortals can do that, big deal.
(see: Wild Wild West) |
| 6. He's gorgeous. | Okay, I'll give you this one. |
| 7. Natalie wants him. | It's a scientific interest, right? |
| 8. Janette wants him back. | She just doesn't like to lose. |
| 9. LaCroix wants him back. | Loves a challenge. |
| 10. <i>I said so.</i> | <i>Big whoopee doo!</i> |

LaCroix Takes The Wheel

(or Driving Mr. LaCroix;
or Mr. LaCroix's Wild Ride)

by Diane Trap

The Duesenberg was dead before it had moved an inch. From the back seat there was a little gasping noise, quickly smothered.

LaCroix turned to glare at Nicholas, but said, "Janette?"

"I swallowed an insect," she replied demurely.

"How unfortunate." LaCroix stroked the smooth wood of the steering wheel speculatively with his thumb. "I trust it won't give you indigestion."

Nicholas glanced over his shoulder. Janette was in the back seat, elegant as always, but her springy posture and the quivering tip of the feather that trailed from her cloche hat betrayed her pleasure at their outing. He understood her happiness, though he couldn't share it; Janette thought that this one night meant everything could be like it had been before, the three of them together -- forever.

He turned and stared through the wind screen. He wouldn't have agreed to this if Janette hadn't been the one to ask. "Start the car again." He measured his words carefully. "Press down on the gas pedal as you let out the clutch."

"My memory is exceptionally good, Nicholas." LaCroix touched his hand to his charcoal grey fedora, adjusting it infinitesimally. "I remember your instructions from the first time you told me."

He reached for the starter. Nicholas braced himself.

The engine sputtered; the car jerked, hard enough to rock the enormous car; the motor died.

Nicholas suppressed a sigh and gave the dashboard a consoling pat. The Duesenberg was the only bright spot in his life since Don Constantine had delivered him to LaCroix like a truant schoolboy. Sleek and red, its eight cylinders purred like a litter of kittens -- but LaCroix had brought them to one of his most remote properties, a plantation owner's once elegant summer home in the middle of the north Georgia pine forests. No matter how Nicholas pushed the miles under the Duesenberg's white-sided tires, he could find no shelter along the lonely country roads, and every dawn forced his return to LaCroix and his decaying wreck of a house.

Sputter. Jerk. Die.

LaCroix had sneered, of course, when the Duesenberg was delivered from Atlanta, his snide remarks making Janette laugh while Nicholas smoothed the dust of the road from the touring car's gleaming sides with a chamois cloth. And now, according to Janette, LaCroix wanted to learn to drive--

Sputter. Jerk. Die.

This was a farce, of course, but Nicholas had agreed to it for Janette's sake. Only for Janette, who wanted his forgiveness for betraying his escape to LaCroix, and forgiveness from LaCroix for helping Nicholas escape in the first place.

Spu...RRROOOOOAARR!

"You can't force it!" Nicholas shouted. The Duesenberg's motor stopped with a grinding noise that tore into his heart like . . . yes, like a wooden stake. He'd been thinking of wooden stakes a good deal lately. And the sun. Always, the sun.

LaCroix's leather-gloved hands tightened, then relaxed on the steering wheel. "*Don't* raise your voice to me, Nicholas."

This was for Janette . . . "It isn't difficult," Nicholas said, a little desperately. "Push down on the gas, like this, and then--"

He tried to show the rhythm with his hands, push down, let up, push down, let up. Slowly, LaCroix turned his head. Little bits of gold began to flicker around his pupils.

"And then let up on the clutch! Yes, Nicholas, let up on the clutch!" LaCroix mimicked Nicholas' motions, both of them pawing the air like a pair of shadow boxers, push down, let up, push down, let up--

There was a giggle from the back seat. They both whipped around to glare at Janette, whose blue eyes were round and bright. Her lips were pressed tightly together. She looked from Nicholas to LaCroix and back again.

"I'm just watching the stars." She waved a smartly gloved finger at the sky. "See? There's the little spoon."

As if their muscles were very stiff, Nicholas and LaCroix settled themselves back into their seats.

"It is indeed a lovely evening," LaCroix agreed softly.

"It's the Little *Dipper*," Nicholas muttered.

The night was dark and hot and close as black velvet sheets. The Duesenberg's powerful headlights showed nothing but the empty road running through deserted woods. The only sound was Janette rummaging through her handbag, then the click as she opened and closed her cigarette case. Her lighter flared; tobacco smoke drifted into the air.

"I thought we were going for a drive," she said innocently.

LaCroix pressed the starter. The car jumped; Janette swore; Nicholas smelled burning wool. "My carpeting!"

"I will have it repaired." LaCroix stared out into the night. Janette made sputtering noises as she gathered up the spilled contents of her purse.

Nicholas refused to ask whether her cigarette was out. "We'll try it again," he said through clenched teeth. "As I count. Down, one, two -- and up -- slowly! -- one, two, three--"

The Duesenberg leapt forward, its engine engaged at last and starting to howl.

"Second gear!" Nicholas shouted, half standing in the front seat. "Second GEAR!"

LaCroix shifted, then shifted again. Nicholas hung on to the wind screen, listening to the gravel pelt the underside of the car, feeling the thrum of the engine, watching the road disappear beneath them. He heard, or thought he heard, LaCroix give a massive "HA!" as he shifted up again -- they were going fifty miles an hour at least now, much too fast, but Nicholas didn't care . . .

. . . until he saw the headlights come over the hill.

"Slow--"

LaCroix went faster. The metal edge of the wind screen bit into Nicholas' fingers. The headlights were coming closer, impossibly slow, it seemed, closer, closer--

LaCroix twisted the wheel as the big panel truck screamed by them. The Duesenberg went up and then down again with a massive crack. Janette shrieked and Nicholas was in the air--

He picked himself up off the ground, much later, it seemed. He was lying next to a fallen log, a log with a branch that stuck up like an accusing finger. He'd missed it by inches.

LaCroix and Janette were out of the car, standing a few paces away. Janette pressed her fingers to her trembling lips. As Nicholas rolled over and sat up he saw LaCroix's face shift and settle into its usual arrogance. Had there been an expression there Nicholas had missed?

"You hit the gas," he said. "Not the brake."

LaCroix's eyes hardened. Steam hissed from under the Duesenberg's stylish hood ornament. Its left front tire was flat.

Nicholas got to his feet and brushed off his clothes. He staggered over to the car, shaking off the shock of his fall.

"The truck should have stopped," LaCroix said.

"It wouldn't have." Janette's voice shook. "It's one of Charlie's."

"Charlie?"

"He's . . . an entrepreneur."

Surely LaCroix had noticed that Janette was coming home drunk on white lightning and bootleggers every night they'd been stuck in this godforsaken place. Nicholas ran his hand over the Duesenberg's fender. He'd seen horses with broken legs that looked less forlorn. He looked back at LaCroix.

"I want to look under her. Do you mind?"

"I don't mind at all," LaCroix replied courteously.

Nicholas waited, but LaCroix didn't move, let alone offer to help. Taking a deep breath, Nicholas found

his log and carried it back to the road. He got a grip under the Duesenberg's running board and raised the car, kicking the log under it to prop it up.

"An entrepreneur?" he heard LaCroix inquire as he crawled under the car. He didn't listen for Janette's answer.

"You can fix it, Nicola?" she asked anxiously when he came out again. "If it is just a tire--"

"It's the axle," he told her, keeping his voice flat with an effort. "It's broken. She'll have to be towed."

He bent to brush dirt off his knees.

"Nicola--"

"Janette." LaCroix cut her off. "That is enough."

Nicholas looked up at them. LaCroix held Janette's arm just above the elbow, just where the nerves could be pinched.

"The automobile is an expensive toy," he said. "Nicholas would not want to abandon it. Come."

Nicholas stared after them as they rose into the air.

"It is not a toy!" he shouted after them.

Nicholas rubbed sleep from his eyes as he stepped out into the balcony of the old plantation house. There were no nights so lush as those of the American south, hot and sweet as blood itself.

"Be careful, just there." Janette's voice came out of the darkness. "There's a bad spot."

The end of her cigarette glowed and faded. Nicholas stepped over the broken board and leaned on the creaking balcony rail.

On the overgrown driveway beneath him was a long, gleaming black automobile, low, dark, and dangerous.

"It's a Cadillac," Janette said. "It was delivered an hour ago."

Nicholas straightened and ran a hand through his hair. "Does he expect me to drive it for him?"

A uniformed chauffeur came out of the house to stand by the car.

Janette came nearer. Amusement warmed her voice. "LaCroix let me pick him out myself. His name is Miklos. Isn't he handsome?"

Her dress was little more than strings of glittering black beads that clicked and glittered as she moved, caught at the hips with a black satin sash. Her hair was in soft curls that caressed her cheeks like a lovers' fingers.

"We're going to see Charlie," she added. Her eyes grew hopeful. "Do you want to go?"

Nicholas looked down at the Cadillac again. His Duesenberg had been hauled to a mechanic behind two mules owned by a friendly farmer; it would be another week before her new axle came from the factory in Indiana. "No."

Janette came closer, carefully picking her way across the warped and cracked boards. "Nicola--"

"I'm going back to school." He picked at a splinter in the balcony rail. "Another university. To study ancient history."

"Perhaps LaCroix can help you with your papers -- he was there, after all--"

He gave her a look that wiped the beginning of a teasing smile off her face. "You will have to ask him, Nicola."

"I'll ask." The splinter came off in his fingers, a piece of wood too tiny to be of any use. "But I will go."

Janette sighed and turned away.

"Do you ever wonder what it would be like without him?" Nicholas asked.

She closed the balcony doors behind her as she left.

Epilogue

Nicholas smiled as he stepped out into the night. There had been a thunderstorm during his class, making his lesson on the Valley of the Kings even more dramatic. He nodded to a pair of his students as he went down the steps of the lecture hall. They giggled; they were pretty girls, who always sat front row center and wrote down everything he said.

He walked to the street, waiting for traffic to pass. Just as he was about to step off the curb an immense black sedan turned the corner. The driver's face, pale and intent:

... LaCroix?

The sedan's wheels hit a puddle, soaking Nicholas' trousers to the knees. As the car careened off into the night he could hear LaCroix's voice:

"AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSION, Nicholas!"

The End

A Worse Curse Than Vampirism by Lynne Levine

Question: What would be the one thing worse than having year-round allergies?

Answer: Being immortal and having allergies!

for example:

(Nick enters Natalie's apartment, looking haggard.)

Natalie: You look like hell.

Nick: I *feel* like hell. It's these allergies. <Achoo!>

Nat: Here, try this. *(hands him a Seldane)*

Nick: *(shakes his head)* It's no use, Nat, nothing works. Every year, as soon as the first blade of grass pokes out from the ground *(sniffle)*, this happens. *(He rubs his eyes, which are red and not just from being a vampire)* I'd go see an allergist but, well, you know I can't do that.

Nat: Have a Kleenex at least. *(hands him entire box)*

Nick: *(after blowing his nose)* Thanks. Oh, and Nat, could you please put that cat in another room?

Nat: *(picking up Sidney)* Oh sorry, I keep forgetting you're allergic to cats.

Nick: Yeah, I forget too. That allergy developed recently -- I think it started around 1845. *(sighs)* I don't know which cure to hope for first -- a cure for vampirism or a cure for allergies. <achoo!>

Car Trouble

by Sharon Himmanen

"It's not 'a little scratch'!" Nick exclaimed, nervously rubbing his chin with his hand. He moved slowly around Natalie, his eyes never leaving the Caddie. "It's more like five scratches, and there's a dent over there, in that rear panel," he added, pointing over her shoulder.

"Well, Knight, that's what you get for trying to be a hot shot. You could drive a city car like the rest of us, but no! You have to be Joe Cool!" Schanke added, shaking his head. "You're lucky, actually. Guy I knew was chasing down a perp, and wrapped his car right around a statue that was part of a visiting art show, right smack in the middle of metro--"

"Just -- just," Nick said, waving his hand helplessly. "Your cousin, he still runs that garage, right?"

"Rudy? Yeah, sure. Hey, and would he love a nice city contract again. I bet he'd even throw in a whole new paint job!" Schanke added enthusiastically.

"Hey, that's an idea, Nick," Nat said. "You could pick out a better color."

Nick turned from his scrutiny of the car. "What's wrong with the color?" he asked defensively. Natalie and Schanke exchanged glances and Schanke even made a slight face as he mouthed the words "puke green." Natalie turned her head away, smiling.

"Uh, nothing. Nothing!" Natalie said, shaking her head. "I just, you know, thought a change might be nice."

Nick took a moment or two to consider the idea before shaking his head. "No. No. *This* is her color. It would be wrong to change it."

"Nick!" Natalie exclaimed. "It's a *car*!"

"An aqua car," Nick corrected. He walked over to the Caddie and bent down, brushing his fingers over the scratches. "Do you think he can match this shade?" he asked, looking up at Schanke expectantly.

"There isn't a color made that Rudy can't match," Schanke said confidently.

* * *

"Oh, by the way Knight," Schanke said, pushing his desk chair back. "Rudy called. He said he'd drop the caddie off in a bit. Definitely be there when you get off shift. He says you're such a special customer that he'll make the exception. He *loves* that car of yours." He leaned back nonchalantly and glanced up at Natalie who was perched on the edge of Nick's desk.

Nick breathed a sigh of relief. "It's about time! Every crackhead in town's made that sedan I've been driving."

"The bottle-thrower you arrested on your way to work?" Schanke asked. Nick merely nodded.

Just then the door to Cohen's office swing open. "Knight!" she called.

Once Nick was gone, Schanke shifted forward. "What are you doing here!" he hissed. "You're going to blow it!"

"Oh right!" Natalie said. "Like I'm gonna miss the expression on his face!"

Schanke grinned evilly. "Word's been spreading. Come dawn, half the guys are gonna be out in the parking lot waiting for the sideshow! Man oh man, I can hardly wait! What time is it?"

Natalie glanced at her watch. "He's off in 45 minutes. I've gotta kill some time," she said suddenly. "I'll be over talking to Norma." She gathered her purse and coat.

When Nick finally emerged from Cohen's office half an hour later, he carefully closed the door behind him and walked purposefully over to his desk.

"I told you, man," Schanke said, shaking his head. "She gets a bee in her bonnet about these reports, and what are you gonna do? Used up a whole bottle of white out correcting them. See, look, I still have some of it on my hands," he said holding the top of his right hand out. "Not to mention the little spots on my tie--"

"Schanke!" Nick said, dropping the papers he was holding and looking up at him.

"What?"

"You're babbling."

"I am?"

"Yes."

He shrugged and gave Nick a lopsided grin. "Sorry. Just trying to kill time, you know. Shift's almost over. No point in really starting anything now -- Hey, Rudy!" Schanke said loudly, looking up and past Nick.

Nick turned and saw Rudy Schanke walking toward him, car keys in one hand. "Hey Donnie! Hey Nick!" he greeted them. Rudy Schanke looked like a younger, thinner Don Schanke with a full head of hair although the two men were about the same age. He shook hands with the two men then handed Nick the car keys with a flourish.

"She's out in the parking lot," he said.

Nick grinned at him, tossing the keys in the air. "Perfect timing. My shift is just ending." He moved past him. "I'm just going to check it out," he said.

"Hey, be my guest. Can't take any chances with a classic like that," Rudy said, falling into step behind him. Schanke looked around at the now almost deserted squad room as people had discretely exited the building as soon as they'd seen Rudy pull up on the monitors.

"But, you know, Knight," Rudy said shaking his head. "I had a little trouble getting just the right shade."

Nick stopped dead in his tracks. "But you got it?" he asked.

"Oh sure, sure. Just took a bit of doing. It's a . . . sort of specialty color, you know. Not a lot of call for it, but, hey, if you know where to look."

Nick grinned. "I knew I could count on you, Rudy," he said, pushing the door to the parking lot open. Dawn was about half an hour away but the parking lot was well lit. Nick didn't notice all the people milling about as his eyes swept over the parking lot looking for the distinctive shape and color of his Caddie. He spotted Schanke's car, and Nat's car, and Cohen's car parked right in front.

And right next to it was . . .

Nick stopped dead in his tracks again. He heard Schanke chuckling behind him, and the sounds of laughter from around him. Natalie was nearly doubled over in hysterics. Against his will, his mind registered that those were indeed his license plates on the car.

Schanke walked around him, still laughing and donning a pair of sunglasses. He leaned casually against the hood of the car. "Surprise, partner! The Boss sang about one. As did Our Lady of Soul, Aretha! Hell, Clint Eastwood even drove Bernadette Peters around in one! It's hip, it's rocking! It's--"

"Pink!" Nick managed to gasp out. This was followed by an inarticulate, choking sound. "It's a pink Cadillac." He whirled. Rudy had been wise enough to move several feet away. "You painted my Caddie pink?" he asked, horrified. Rudy shrugged, and grinned.

Nick was about to take a step toward Rudy. To do what, he wasn't sure, but he *had* to do something. But before he could move Schanke pushed himself away from the car and clapped Nick on the shoulder. "Relax!" he said, still grinning. He turned and nodded to several uniforms standing over near the corner of the building. "Your precious Nick-mobile is safe and sound and still that awful color," he said as the men returned, rolling Nick's car from behind the building where it had been hidden. "Rudy's had this thing lying around for years. It doesn't even run, but we did a quick paint job just for the occasion." Nick was immobile, his expression bewildered. "We switched the plates, that's all! Joke's on you, partner! You should see your face!"

Nick managed a weak grin, not sure how to respond, then he gave up and tilted his head back, breathing a huge sigh of relief. He grabbed Schanke's hand and shook it vigorously, laughing. "You really had me going there for a minute!" he said. He walked over to the Caddie, his undented, unscratched, aqua Caddie, carefully inspecting it.

At that moment, Cohen stormed out of the building. Hands on hips she surveyed the crowd. "What are we running here?" she demanded. But then the corners of her mouth quirked into a small smile as she took in the pink Caddie, the aqua Caddie and Nick and Schanke and nearly everyone else standing around with silly grins on their faces. "A police station or an auto show? Back to work!" she added, before returning inside.

* * *

"What?" Natalie demanded. "You've been grinning like a Cheshire cat since we got back." They were sitting in Nick's loft, side by side on the leather couch.

He looked up at her. "Were you in on that?" he asked.

"Ah, my lawyer advised me not to say anything that might incriminate me," she said with a laugh. "Actually, Schanke ran the idea by me to see what I thought."

"And how I'd take it?"

"Basically," Natalie added, with a nod. "I told him not to drag it on too long."

Nick gave a small laugh, and looked down at his hands. Natalie tilted her head and looked at him thoughtfully. "What?" she asked again.

"It's . . . it's just, well, a little silly, maybe?"

"Silly is good, especially at this time of the morning."

Nick looked up at her quickly, still smiling. "You know, these sort of pranks go on all the time. They get pretty elaborate at times. It's sort of, I don't know, the social make up of the place, how people get along and relieve stress, or something." Nick looked away. "I never really felt part of that," he added quietly. Then he looked back at her and took her hand. "Until this morning," he said, with another small laugh. "It was just a practical joke," he said, trying to dismiss it.

"But it made you feel like you belong," Natalie said, meeting his gaze and squeezing his hand.

"Yeah," he said softly. "Yeah, it did."

Natalie smiled gently at him, then impulsively leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "There's nothing silly about that, Nick. Nothing silly at all."

The End

One of Our Own

by Siobhan

Sheets of rain made the early morning even darker than usual as the paddy wagon disgorged a mass of bodies into the 37th precinct's booking area. This morning's group was not the usual roundup of hard-faced hookers or tough-acting drug dealers. This group looked as if it had been collected from the fringes of a high school dance, or maybe from a public library: Six men and two women, young, pale, nerdy types who were more than a little bewildered by their current surroundings.

"Gentlemen, ladies! Single file line against the left hand wall. Let's go!" Riding herd on the group was Detective Don Schanke, who was not amused when one of his charges leaned against the wall and slid down to sit on the floor. "Hey! On your feet! You'll have plenty of time to sit when you're in the holding cells." He walked over to the small blonde and nudged her foot with the toe of his shoe. "You hear me? Get up." He nudged again.

"Ow! You kicked me!" she yelled, and turned to her companions. "You saw that, didn't you? He kicked me! Police brutality! Abuse of authority!"

"Aw, geez. This is all I need," Schanke muttered, rolling his eyes.

"I know my rights! Police brutality! Get me a lawyer! I demand to see a lawyer right now!" she continued to shriek at the top of her lungs as Schanke pulled her to her feet.

"That's enough! Nobody's done anything to you," he yelled back, adding under his breath, "Not yet, anyway."

"OW! My arm! I bet it's broken!" the woman yelled. She began to struggle with Schanke, aiming her feet at his shins while continuing her tirade. For a petite woman, her voice was amazingly powerful, and her kicks alarmingly effective. A couple of uniformed officers restrained her and pulled her off to one side.

"That does it. You just added another item to the list, sister: assaulting a police officer," Schanke said, rubbing his shin where one of her kicks had landed. "Take her downstairs to cool off while the rest of her pals here get booked. Hsieh, they're all yours."

Having handed the group over to the booking officer, Schanke straightened his tie and brushed at his rumpled clothing. He walked down the hall to his office, stuck his head in the door, and knocked on the wall to get his partner's attention. "Hey, Knight -- they're hee-eere! Time to debrief McGee." He turned and headed back down the hall to the interrogation rooms, and entered the second one.

"Was that really necessary? I'm gonna have bruises for a week!" he exclaimed to the grinning young woman perched pixie-like on the table.

"You're lucky I wasn't wearing boots," she laughed. "Was that a credible enough diversion, Schanke?"

"Ah, our specialist returns. I heard your dulcet tones all the way down the hall," said Knight, leaning against the doorway. He was nudged into the room from behind by a straight-faced Captain Stonetree.

Shannon McGee quickly scooted off the table and took a more dignified seat in one of the chairs as Knight and Stonetree came in and sat down.

"All right, McGee, let's hear a preliminary report," the Captain said, folding his arms across his chest.

"My investigation indicated that there were about a half-dozen hackers who had broken in to the city's municipal records database. Seven individuals were ID'd breaking in and making changes to the decoy database, all of whom had indicated to me at club meetings they had a special interest in cracking systems and entering prank data. I'll be cross-checking phone records and the data from their systems, which were confiscated this afternoon. I'm certain they're the ones we were looking for."

"Any possibility they can use entrapment as a defense?"

"No sir, I worked with the Crown Prosecutor's Office every step of the way. No entrapment."

"Good," Stonetree grunted. "Good work, McGee, Schanke." He started to get up.

"There's more," McGee said with a grin. "I've got a line on an even bigger fish. When I joined the PC Addicts, I began to hear tales of a local guru who could crack *any* system *anywhere*. The stories they told sounded like the ones I've been hearing for a few years now in Chicago. They call him 'The Wizard.' Well, now I know why -- I've got his name. It's Merlin."

"Yeah, right, McGee," said Schanke. Knight was all ears.

"I'm serious: Larry Merlin. As soon as I mop up the details from this bust, I'll start checking him out. If it's the same guy, there's a list of database incidents a mile long that have been attributed to him through the hackers' grapevine. I've been looking for him for four years now."

Stonetree's brow furrowed. "Active on both sides of the border, hmm? Well, you'll have our full cooperation on that investigation as well. Will you need to bring anybody else up from Chicago to help you? Or if you need it, I can detail you some more backup here . . ."

"No, sir, but thanks for the offer."

"All right then, good hunting, McGee," Stonetree got up and headed for the door. He stopped in the doorway and looked over his shoulder. "And McGee? Nice to have you back, even if it's just for a short visit."

"Thank you, Captain."

"You mean I'm still not off this detail?" Schanke griped good-naturedly as he got up from his chair and worked loose a kink in his neck.

"Hey, I've waited a long time for a solid lead on this guy. I'm afraid you two are stuck with me for the duration."

"Sounds like a long time. In that case, what do you say we fuel up with a couple of gyros? And some nice rizogalo maybe?"

"Your idea of breakfast food never ceases to amaze me."

"Then think of it as a *really* late dinner."

"Okay. You buying?" McGee grinned.

"All right. But you get the check next time. Knight! Wake up! You coming? Zorba's is on the way to your place . . ."

Nick had been lost in thought, but pulled his attention back to the present. "No, no thanks."

"Tsk, tsk. You and that macrobiotic Spartan warrior diet," Schanke said, standing in the doorway and shaking his head. "A gyro will be consumed in your honor, then." He took McGee's arm and started down the hall. "You realize of course, that if I'm buying, you're driving . . ." Schanke's voice faded into the distance, and Nick's thoughts went back to the past . . .

Tombstone, Arizona 1881

Nick waited impatiently for the last deadly rays of the Arizona sun to fade before he left for the sheriff's office. He'd chosen Tombstone for his first foray into law enforcement for two reasons: it seemed to need the help, and a desert town bathed in merciless sunlight might be, with any luck, the last place LaCroix would come looking for him.

Nick was in luck. Billy Breakenridge, the chief deputy and the man who made the hiring decisions, was still at work and willing to talk to him. After a brief wait, Nick was led into his office.

A stocky, distinguished-looking man with his hair parted down the middle and sporting a graying handlebar mustache rose from his desk to shake Nick's hand. Breakenridge looked more like a judge or a banker than a former Indian fighter turned frontier lawman. "So, Mr. Lawrence, I hear you're looking to become a constable."

"Yes, Sheriff Breakenridge."

"Call me Breck -- everybody does. Say, you look familiar to me. I never forget a face. Folks hereabouts say I've got a mind like a filing cabinet," Breck chuckled. He snapped his fingers. "I've got it. Ever travel with a circus?"

"A circus?" he asked in a tone of disbelief. *He wasn't kidding about his memory.* "No, not me."

"Seems like I saw a fellah looked a lot like you in Ogden, Utah. Acrobat with the Dan Rice Circus. I won tickets from some circus men in a friendly game of pool, and took my sister-in-law and a couple of Mormon girls who worked for her to see the show." He shook his head. "Nah -- you couldn't be the same man. That was back in '69. You're too young to have been him. Well, back to the matter at hand. Why do you want to join the law here in Tombstone? You handy with a gun? Lookin' for some excitement? Hoping for some more shootouts, maybe?"

"No, sir. I believe there are better ways to solve problems than with a gun," Nick said. "I'm a good shot, yes, but I only pull my gun as a last resort."

"Then you're a man after my own heart. Half the men who come in here want to make a name for themselves with a gun, and the other half think they already have. As for me, I've always tried to follow

the advice of Fred White, who used to be the town marshal here. He always said that any idiot could gun a man down, but it took a real lawman to bring him to face justice alive." He took a badge out of his desk drawer and tossed it to Nick. "You're hired, constable. You start tomorrow. Be here first thing in the morning, and we'll --"

Nick interrupted, "Breck, there's just one thing -- I have a problem with being out in the sun. I caught a bad case of sun poisoning awhile back, and now I burn badly. I had in mind working the night shift."

"Sun poisoning, hmmm? Nasty stuff." Breck grinned. "You sure picked a hell of a place to recover from it."

Nick smiled back. "It made sense at the time. So, am I still hired?"

"You certainly are. I'm always having trouble keeping night constables. I'll see you tomorrow night then."

"Until tomorrow." Nick rose, and shook Breck's offered hand. As he headed for the door, a deputy tacked up another wanted poster in the office's "rogue's gallery." Nick paused briefly to scan the sheet, which told of a safecracker wanted for breaking into banks and stage offices. He usually struck at night, and the next morning the safes were found empty, with the doors ripped off. Nick made a mental note of it, and left the office.

* * *

"McGee? A courier just dropped this off for you."

"Great! I've been waiting for this all afternoon. Thanks!" Shannon took the slender envelope from the uniformed officer and began to open it.

"That the stuff from the phone company?" Schanke asked. "That was quick. It usually takes a couple of days to get a response."

"Sometimes it helps to have a good friend in the database division. A Chinese dinner didn't seem like too high a price to pay for a little individualized attention."

"He sure didn't send you much."

Shannon held up the two floppy disks, still swaddled in a layer of bubble wrap. "*Au contraire, mon ami*, she sent *plenty*. Now to get this tucked away into my hard drive . . ." She entered a sequence of commands into her PC faster than Schanke could follow.

"Geez. Just how many words per minute can you type?"

She grinned. "Lots. Let's see, what's an appropriate password? Ah. Got it." She entered a few keystrokes more, took the last diskette out, and put in a blank one in. "A copy of the protected files . . ." She swapped disks again. "And voila!" Shannon pried open the plastic carriers of the two original disks and fished out the magnetic circles they held.

"I always wondered what was in those things. Hey! You're not going to shred them, are you?"

"Yup. Security procedure. Now, if you'll excuse me, Schanke, I've had a *very* long day. See you tomorrow morning. *Late* tomorrow morning." She tossed the two backup floppies into her tote bag and shouldered it. "Bye!"

"Let me know if you find anything good," Schanke called after her departing figure.

"Tomorrow!"

It was a short drive from the precinct to the department's "safe house" condo where Shannon was living during her stay in Toronto. Shortly after she'd arrived in town, Detective Knight and Natalie Lambert from the Coroner's Office had stopped by to see if she'd needed anything. Natalie, guessing that the condo wasn't as well-stocked as it should be, had even brought a bag of groceries and a couple of rental movies.

Shannon paused just long enough to take off her coat and set up her umbrella to dry before sitting down at her PC. Despite her protestations to Schanke to the contrary, Shannon knew she couldn't rest until she had at least peeked at the data from the phone company. It was clear from the records that Merlin was running a BBS on one of his numbers, and it was a BBS with a select and loyal clientele: less than a dozen numbers called in, and they all repeated with great regularity.

Shannon threw together a sandwich, and called it a night after making some notes on her findings and printing a hard copy. Her dreams that night were filled with winged creatures who chased her relentlessly and shredded her printouts.

Tombstone, Arizona 1881

The night was cool and clear and silver and black. A full moon rose over the streets of Tombstone, silvering the sun-faded buildings. The deep night shadows were interrupted by the occasional buttery puddle from the new gas street lamps.

Breck had told Nick to pay special attention to the area between Fifth and Sixth Streets where Tombstone's highest concentration of saloons and prostitutes could be found. The town's business district was much busier than Nick had expected. But late night was the high point of a miner's day: he could get out of the mines, get drunk, find a woman and forget about his troubles. Unfortunately that was when he usually became offensive to the townsfolk.

This night was turning out to be a typical one for Nick. He "encouraged" a couple of miners -- who had given over much of their pay to several barkeeps -- to head for home, then escorted one of the town's soiled doves back to her place of business. The law tolerated prostitution, provided the "fancy ladies" didn't troll for business on the public streets. After all, the miners knew where to find them.

After he returned "Crazy Horse Lil" to her lodgings, Nick stopped a moment to look up at the sky. No clouds obscured his view of the Milky Way. In fact, the clear desert air seemed to magnify the stars and make them look so close Nick thought he could reach out and touch them. Except for the tinkling of the piano over at the Oriental Saloon, the town was nearly silent. Even so, it took a vampire's sharp hearing to detect quiet footfalls on a roof, and the sound of nailed boards being eased slowly out of position and placed gently aside. A break-in! Nick located the direction of the sounds, checked to see if he was being watched, then took to the air.

He headed for Front Street. As he flew over the bank, he noticed the neatly square hole in the roof where the boards had been pulled up. Nick didn't see any sign of the robber -- no signature trail of heat left by a mortal's warm blood. He landed gently on the roof, crawled over to the hole -- keeping as small a silhouette as possible -- and peered inside. Moonlight streaming into the bank spotlighted the robber, who looked like he was about to rip the door off the safe with his bare hands.

Nick dropped down into the bank directly behind the robber. Despite Nick's near-silent landing, his quarry heard him. As the robber turned to face him, Nick saw fangs gleaming in the moonlight. Another vampire?

Taken completely by surprise, Nick bared *his* fangs and snarled. The robber, obviously expecting to get a quick snack along with his stolen money, was even more surprised than Nick, and flew up and out of the hole in the roof.

* * *

Nick awoke with a start, unsure whether it had been his memories or his alarm clock that had awakened him. He reached for his phone, thought better of it, then got ready for work.

* * *

"Janette? It's Nick."

"Nicolah, what is that horrible noise? You sound like you're calling from the bottom of the seventh pit of hell."

"Close enough. I'm using a gas station pay phone. Look, Janette, I need to get a message to Larry Merlin. It's extremely urgent."

An iciness crept into Janette's tone. "Am I your secretary, now, Nicolah? You have his number. Better yet, call his computer billboard."

"Bulletin board."

"Whatever."

"That's the problem. The police are on to him, and they've requested his phone records. They'll get a list of every one he's called and every one who's called him. Or his BBS. He needs to get into the phone company database before they can give out the information. There's no time to lose."

"All right, all right. I'll send Alma to him with the message." Although she half-covered the receiver with her hand, Nick could hear her instructing Alma. "No, NOW. *Plus vite!* It's vital." She came back on the line. "She's on her way. Reluctantly, but she's on her way."

"Thanks, Janette. I knew I could count on you."

Janette sighed. "Yes, Nicolah, but a woman wants a man to do more than just *count* on her, you know."

"I know. And if I weren't late for work . . ."

"Ah! You and your work!" Janette's tone had changed from seductive to shrewish in an instant. Nick was well acquainted with her vocabulary of French invectives, so he silently hung up the phone and got back into the Caddy.

By lunchtime the next day, Schanke could contain himself no longer. "Well? What do you have on this Merlin guy?"

"I've got his outgoing calls arranged by international codes and area codes. The incoming calls are sorted the same way, with his voice and data lines separated. I've also just sent out the request for a dummy phone line to the phone company." Shannon beamed up at Schanke.

"That's it?"

"What were you expecting? To see him cuffed to a chair in front of my desk?"

"You just played with the phone numbers all morning?"

"The information isn't much use listed only chronologically, Schanke."

"But didn't you find out who he's called or who's called him? Pick up the phone! Start dialing!"

She looked at him and sighed. "Calling the numbers leaves the same kind of footprint that the phone company gave us for *their* calls. The last thing I want is for these people to know the police are calling them. Once the dummy line is set up, with its false identifications, I can start making calls. Meanwhile, I've sent out the list of numbers to be searched in criss-cross directories. Though that won't catch the unlisted ones."

Schanke looked only half convinced.

"Do I recall correctly that I owe you lunch from yesterday?" Shannon asked.

His face brightened considerably. "You do indeed."

"Well, then, let me lock up these printouts and settle that debt."

"Sounds good to me. I've got a report to finish up--" he interrupted himself. "It never ceases to amaze me how Knight can work all night, but there's always even more paperwork on my desk every morning than there was when I left. Ten minutes okay?"

"Ten it is." As Schanke returned to his desk, Shannon tucked the printouts into a drawer, pulled out her purse, and locked her desk. She did a quick check of her wallet to see if she needed to go to an ATM before lunch. Her cash situation was fine, but in between the bills she noticed Knight's business card. She made a mental note to file it in her address book, and flipped it over to tuck it in a safer corner of her wallet. He'd given her the card when he'd taken her to the condo, and he'd written his home number on the back. Something about the number nagged at Shannon. She hesitated, reached for the key to her desk, and hesitated again.

"Ready?" Schanke was back at his desk, twirling his car keys.

"Yeah, let's go," Shannon said, looking preoccupied as she put her keys and wallet in her purse again.

"You okay McGee?" he asked, concerned.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm fine," she said, coming out of her mental fog. "I think I've been staring at phone numbers too long, that's all. A good lunch will get me back on track."

Lunch didn't help.

Knight's phone number tickled the edges McGee's mind from her first bite of Greek salad, hung in through the souvlaki, and didn't let up even when she counterattacked with baklava. As soon as they returned to the precinct, Shannon got out the printouts and the business card. She'd been right. Detective Knight was a frequent caller to Merlin's BBS.

Shannon sighed and rubbed her temples. Schanke's partner possibly in on this? That was bad. Very bad. If she were to go by the book, she should alert IA immediately, and they'd take over. Take over part of *her* case. She'd been chasing this Merlin character for four years, dammit, this was *her* bust. *Time to bend the rules*, she thought. *Time to pay a call on Detective Knight.*

* * *

"Yeah?" A slightly groggy voice came over the security intercom.

"Detective Knight? Shannon McGee. I hate to bother you on your day off, but I'd like to talk to you about the investigation I'm working on."

There was a long pause. After what seemed like minutes, Shannon heard the elevator's motor start.

"Come on up," Knight finally said.

Shannon got into the elevator, and as it made its ascent, wondered for the tenth time if perhaps this was a bad idea. The elevator stopped. The doors opened. *Too late now.*

Knight looked like an unmade bed with his hair uncombed and clothes slightly rumpled. Shannon was sure that there *was* an unmade bed, probably still warm, somewhere in the apartment, so she asked the obvious question. "I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"Not really. I should have been up anyway." He ran a hand through his hair, smoothing it out a bit. "You said you had some questions?"

Shannon took a deep breath, then looked Knight in the eye. "This isn't going to be easy, so I won't beat around the bush. I've been looking over the information the phone company sent listing callers to Larry Merlin's BBS. Your telephone number shows up all over the place. In fact, you're one of his best customers. Do you have an explanation?"

Nick smiled a cold, sarcastic smile. "So, are you assigned to Internal Affairs now?" he countered, then continued after seeing her puzzled frown. "Because *by the book*, lieutenant, if a cop is implicated in wrongdoing, the case goes to IA." He came closer, locking his gaze on her, listening to her heartbeat. "But it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter," Shannon repeated dully.

"Because you're mistaken. It's not my phone number."

"Not--" she shook her head, momentarily confused, and rubbed her forehead. "Not your number? Of course it is. Do you think I'd make an accusation like this without hard evidence to back it up?" *Hell of a time to go spacey, McGee!* she thought. "The number on the back of your business card, the phone number in your personnel file, and one of the numbers of Merlin's callers -- they're identical. Yours."

Hypnosis had been a long shot considering the material evidence she had, but he'd had to try it. Time for the second option: reason. "Shannon, I'm part of a unique -- community." He glanced away from her, looking a bit guilty, and then continued, choosing his words carefully. "It's one not easily assimilated into the rest of society. Larry Merlin provides certain services that help us to blend in. And we use his BBS to keep in touch with one another."

Shannon hadn't known what kind of explanation to expect from Knight, but this one wouldn't have made any list of possibilities she could have come up with. "So, what are you saying? Merlin's a humanitarian doing favors for illegal aliens and I should leave him alone? Knight, he's breaking into other people's computers and altering their data."

"He helps create new identities for us when we -- have to move on. He's not stealing anything or hurting anyone. He probably prevents more illegal activities than he commits."

"He's breaking the law. Period. And he's got to be stopped."

So much for reason. Time to pull out all the stops, Nick thought. Reluctantly, he turned away from Shannon. He let his eyes grow golden, and felt his fangs extend. "Illegal aliens' you said? How about inhuman monsters?" He turned back to face her and advanced, snarling.

Shannon gasped and backed up a few steps. Her retreat was blocked by the back of the couch. "Nice effect," she said, clearly frightened but beginning to regain control of herself. "But I had a roommate in college who was a practicing Satanist. She got weirder things than you in her breakfast cereal." As Nick came closer, he could almost see the pieces come together in her mind. *Night shift. 'Skin condition.' Strange diet.* "Vampire," she whispered, momentarily more fascinated than afraid. "You're a vampire?"

"Yes."

Another piece clicked into place. "Then the other callers . . . and Merlin, too? All vampires? My God!"

Nick grabbed her by the shoulders. "Shannon, you've got to drop the investigation. Destroy the evidence. You're in a great deal of danger--"

"From you? No. If you were going to kill me, you'd have done it by now." Shannon's voice grew more confident as she spoke. "You're Schanke's partner. You're not a monster, you're a cop -- like *me*."

"Others -- not as nice as I am," he said sarcastically, "will find out you have this evidence, and they won't just *ask* you for it. They'll kill you for it."

Tombstone, Arizona 1881

The fanged safe cracker flew up and out of the hole in the bank's roof. Nick was about to follow him

when he heard voices in the street. Apparently a couple of passersby had seen the vampire on the roof and had yelled for help. A crowd was forming, with some splitting off to give chase to the robber, and some trying to get into the bank to assess the damage he might have done.

Nick decided to try to head off both groups before things got out of hand. He came out of the bank through the front door, interrupting the men who were alternately yelling for the bank manager and trying to shoot out the lock.

"He's gone out the way he came in. I interrupted him before he could get into the safe. There's nothing missing, except some decorum in the streets," Nick said loudly, and raised his voice even more on the last sentence. He picked a man he recognized as being level-headed out of the crowd. "Johnson! Go wake Sheriff Breck and tell him what's happened. Tell him I'll be standing guard here until the bank manager arrives, then I'll meet him back at his office to report."

"What about that robber? Want us to form up a posse?" a voice yelled from the crowd.

"He's probably halfway to California by now. I scared the life out of him when I surprised him. Let's let the sheriff decide about posses. For now, everybody just go home. Show's over."

After a bit of grumbling, the crowd reluctantly dispersed. As the last hanger-on drifted down the street, there was the sound of catlike footsteps from the roof of the bank. "The scene was a bit cliché, but nicely played." A figure clothed in black flew down and landed in front of Nick.

"LaCroix," Nick said heavily, "I should have known."

"So, I see you've met my latest toy."

"Why did you turn him?"

"For a lark, I suppose. You weren't around to amuse me," he added sharply. "Besides, I wanted to see how one of these rustic, frontiersman types would take to the immortal life. He's a little disappointing, but he'll keep boredom at bay for awhile. What do you think of him, Nicholas?"

"You do realize that I'll get him next time," he said defiantly.

"Get him?" Whatever do you mean? Ah! What is that I see shining on your chest? Could it be . . . a badge?" LaCroix plucked at the metal shield. "'Constable.' Constable? How absolutely delightful! A wolf guarding the sheep! Now, why didn't I think of that . . ."

"LaCroix, I'm warning you. Don't interfere."

"Don't tell me you're taking this," he said, tapping the badge, "seriously, Nicholas."

"I am. And I'll stop your protege for good the next time we cross paths--"

"I see," LaCroix interrupted, coldly. "You plan to arrest him, then?"

"That *is* the idea, yes."

"And jail him?"

"What's your point, LaCroix?" Nick said impatiently.

"The point, dear boy, is that if you do, the Enforcers will be down on you in an instant -- again. And this time I won't be there to save your neck." Nick opened his mouth to respond, but LaCroix cut him off, moving closer until he was in Nick's face. "Bring him in and you'll both fry. Think about it, Nicholas. Is your pretty badge worth your immortal life? Hmm?"

As quick as a thought, LaCroix melted back into the shadows, laughing a quiet, mocking laugh.

* * *

"What 'others'?" asked Shannon. "The vampire Mafia?"

"That's not funny." Nick pushed the beast back down, and his eyes and teeth returned to normal. He sighed, and took Shannon's hands in his. "I don't 'play cop' just to fill a few empty hours. I take it very seriously. And believe it or not, I don't like bending the rules any more than you do. But once in awhile you have to. Let this one go, Shannon." Her back stiffened, and her chin rose defiantly. "At least promise me you'll think about it tonight."

She tried to avoid his gaze. "Let me go," she said, trying to pull away from Nick.

"Please, Shannon. For your own safety?" He kept his grip on her hands firm until she finally nodded, then released her. She turned without a word, and took the elevator back down to her car.

Shannon had never been so glad to be back in her car. She quickly locked the door, and sank back into the seat. *If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes . . . A vampire?* She shuddered. Of all the horror icons she'd met through movies and books as a child, vampires had been her least favorite. *Probably something to do with all that blood . . .* She shook off the creepy feelings the subject was inspiring, and turned her mind back to the task at hand.

She pulled the preliminary results from the criss-cross directory out of her purse. Merlin's favorite number to call belonged to a bar called "The Raven." She checked the address, glanced at her map of Toronto, then drove off. *I promised him I'd think about it. And I've done some of my best thinking in bars . . .*

"Popular place," she muttered to herself as she circled the block, looking for a parking space. She finally found one near an alley at the back of the club. Shannon maneuvered her car into a pool of light from a nearby streetlight, and got out.

She never saw the two black-clad forms detach themselves from the shadowed alley entrance until they grabbed her and pulled her back into the dark. . .

* * *

Shannon felt like she'd been hacked in two by an axe. Or like her midsection had been sprayed with automatic weapons fire. She got up, hugging her stomach, and looked around the room. Everything looked garish, the colors brighter and changed somehow. Shannon headed for the nearest window to look out and get her bearings. Big mistake. At the first touch of the sun's rays, her hand began to sizzle and smoke. She screamed and flung herself into the relative safety of a dark corner. She tried to calm herself, to think rationally.

Food. I've got to have food. They must have locked me in here for days for me to be starving like this -- maybe I was drugged, she thought. She checked her watch. If her waterproof, shockproof alarm chronograph was to be believed, a little more than twelve hours had passed since she had left Nick's apartment and been accosted by the pair of goons outside the Raven. *Just twelve hours? That's not possible.*

Slowly her memory of the previous night returned. The goons, the bones in her arm breaking as they took the diskettes from her, this warehouse, fangs . . .

They had dragged her up the concrete stairs by her wrists, nearly dislocating her shoulders in the process. Nobody could have heard her screams, but they clearly annoyed the bigger of the two Enforcers. At the top of the stairs, he hurled her against the wall, and went for her throat.

"Stop!" shouted the other. "Put her under."

The other looked over his shoulder at him and growled, saliva dripping from his fangs.

"Now!"

He hissed, but turned back to Shannon, who struggled feebly in his grip. He stared into her eyes. She tried to look away, but the pressure on her mind to comply was too great. The physical world seemed to recede, and Shannon felt like she was floating. Bits of the shorter Enforcer's comments made it through her mental haze.

"... said to turn her, not kill her. She's worth more to the Community . . . He wants her to help him in his work . . . important service he provides . . . didn't say we had to deliver her though. . . . Do it."

Shannon gasped as the silent Enforcer's fangs tore into her throat. He drank greedily, pinning her to the wall with one arm. All sound and light faded as he drained her body of blood. A point of red light seemed to appear in the distance, and she struggled toward it. The red glimmer grew until it filled her vision, and then surrounded her.

"... leave her here. If she happens to go rogue from the hunger, we'd have no choice but to come back and finish the job." Shannon realized she was making sense of the sounds she was hearing. She was coming out of whatever trance she'd been in, and noticed an odd taste in her mouth. Salty, metallic -- finally the realization hit that she was drinking blood from the silent Enforcer's wrist. And she wanted more.

The Enforcer who had been speaking came closer. "Enough!" he said, and pulled her off the other's wrist. He examined her eyes, and then her teeth. "She's across. Let's go." He tossed her into a windowless corner of the room, and the two left as she lost consciousness.

"Impossible," she said out loud. But how else to explain her scorched hand, burned by harmless sunlight? The hand that was now starting to heal as she watched, amazed. And her incredible hunger, her craving for blood? Knight had been right. There were vampires who were "not as nice" as him who would try to stop her. Two had tried her, convicted her, and given her the most ironic of sentences: to spend all eternity as undead as they were. Shannon gave in to her despair and covered her face with her hands and sobbed. No tears would come -- she was too hungry for her body to allow her the luxury of a good cry.

A scratching, scurrying sound drew her attention. Rats! Normally, the idea of merely sharing the same room with a rodent gave Shannon the creeps, and considering *dining* on one was too horrible to contemplate. But now she found herself thinking, *There isn't much blood in a rat, but the hunger will drive me mad if I don't at least try* . . . Shannon lay down and played dead, hoping the rats would come and investigate. She wasn't disappointed, and managed to catch and drain three in quick succession. The blood of the fourth she spread on her injured hand. It quickly soaked in and completed the healing process.

Having taken the edge off her hunger, Shannon looked around her prison. There was only one door, and it had been left open a tantalizing crack. She was obviously meant to escape. However, between her island of shadow and the exit lay a wide expanse of deadly sunlight streaming in through banks of windows. There was nothing to do but wait until sunset. If she could survive that long.

* * *

"Hey! Anybody seen McGee?" Schanke bellowed from the door of the watch room. Nothing but negative shakes of heads answered him. He smacked the door frame with some rolled-up forms in frustration.

"What's the matter, Schank? Lose somebody?" a voice at his elbow asked.

"Jeez, Nat, you scared the life outta me. What are you trying to do, drum up business?" The coroner just smiled. "I'm looking for McGee. Nobody's seen her all day, and she didn't call in sick . . . It's just not like her to not show up without an explanation."

"Maybe she's gone after that superhacker?"

"Not without telling somebody. I watched her come up through the ranks here before she moved to Chicago. She's one thorough, by-the-book cop. She'd never go after a suspect without backup, not even a computer nerd like this Merlin guy. Stonetree is all over me like white on rice about the case, and I can't get into her computer files without the password."

"And you're not ready to play hacker yourself?" Nat said with a teasing grin.

"No way. She's got some kind of home-grown security system on her PC -- if the wrong password is entered, the files get wiped. Pretty paranoid, huh?"

"Sounds pretty cautious to me, considering the kind of perps she deals with. Well, I'm only a humble coroner, not a detective, but it seems to me that the best way to proceed would be to find out who the last person was to see her, and when."

"Do I tell you how to cut up your bodies?"

"Nope. You're usually too busy eating your lunch over them."

"Ha, ha, ha." Schanke paused mid-stride and snapped his fingers. "Now that you mention it, she did say something about running some of the phone company stuff past -- Heh, that sly old dog . . ." Schanke was almost leering.

"What are you talking about?"

Oops. Open mouth, insert foot, Schanke thought, and decided to head back to his office, double time. Unfortunately for him, Nat was right behind him.

"Schanke! C'mon, give!" She had followed him into his office, and leaned over his desk, fists planted amongst the paperwork in an I-will-not-be-moved position.

Great. All those years with Myra, and I still don't know how to keep my mouth shut around women! he thought "Okay, okay -- it's probably nothing, but McGee said she was going to stop by and see Knight about some of the numbers the phone company had given her. He had last night off, and -- um -- maybe she's . . . well, still there. Or something." He winced at that last bit, but, Nat had wanted to know . . .

To her credit, Nat didn't let the sinking sensation she felt show. *He couldn't,* she thought. *I mean, if he did . . . But he wouldn't anyway, so it's a moot point.* She picked up the receiver of Schanke's phone and handed it to him. "So call him. Maybe he knows where she went after she left his place." Nat stayed to hear Schanke's side of the conversation.

"So, McGee stopped by early last night, huh? You two just *talked* briefly, and she left? Did she say she was going anywhere other than home? No? Well, she hasn't shown up here, and we were getting a little worried. Yeah, 'we.' Nat and me. And Stonetree's climbing the walls, of course. Yeah, I'll tell her. I hope you're right, partner. Hasta la bye-bye."

"First off, Knight says you have a suspicious mind." Schanke grinned. "Second, he thinks McGee can take care of herself, and will probably show up any minute now with a perfectly good explanation. Satisfied?"

"Are you?"

"About McGee? No. I think I'll call the phone company and ask them to re-send the info on Larry Merlin. Then I'll start checking those numbers myself."

"Looking for what?"

"Where McGee might have gone -- and stayed."

* * *

Shannon's consciousness slowly returned. She was sitting in the shadows of a filthy alley, leaning against a dumpster. Something sticky covered her lips and chin. She rubbed a tentative hand across her mouth. It came away red. Her memory of the past hours returned in a rush, with crystal clarity. *No. Please, no.* She leapt to her feet and backed away from the dumpster, shuddering and hugging herself.

"Knight," Shannon said aloud. His kind had done this to her. He had to be able to help. She wiped the blood from her mouth, then took to the air, avoiding looking into the open dumpster. She flew toward Gateway Lane, trying to move unobserved through the night sky.

There was no response to her repeated buzzes on the security intercom. She batted at the unit in impatience, nearly ripping it from the wall. Shannon circled the building looking for another entrance. She found it in a skylight. It wasn't shuttered against intruding sunlight like the windows, but had deeply tinted glass instead. It broke easily as she flew through it and landed in Knight's apartment. Looking back at the damage she'd done, she noticed a blinking LED near the frame -- the skylight had been protected by an alarm, but that was fine with Shannon. She could use the company. Whoever came would supply

her with answers -- or with nourishment. She settled in to wait.

* * *

Nick's vibrating beeper went off in his jacket pocket. "Damn!" he muttered. Some burglar had really picked the wrong night to hit his apartment.

When Nick had come on duty, his first task had been to deal with a frantic Schanke. There had been no sign of McGee, and Schanke had put out an unofficial APB on her, telling every cop he saw to keep an eye out for her. The phone company had resent the information McGee had requested, and it consisted of a one-page printout with calls to directory assistance and a pizza delivery outfit. Attached was a note from McGee's friend saying she didn't understand what was going on, but was investigating the possibility that the phone company's records had been tampered with.

The deepening mystery of McGee's whereabouts was put on the back burner when two freshly decapitated corpses, missing most of their blood, had been found in a dumpster just a few blocks from the Raven. Roberts and Mitchell were assigned to cover the case. Later, Janette had called Nick to say that she had asked around, but nobody had seen or heard anything -- except rumors that Enforcers were prowling around. So, the last thing Nick needed was a determined crackhead bent on trading Nick's electronic toys for nirvana in a pipe.

Especially with Nat coming over after work with a couple of movies.

There was no time to take the Caddy. Nick found an empty office with a window, jumped out, and flew home.

* * *

Nat pulled up in front of Nick's place with a squeal of brakes. Nick didn't realize it, but she was bringing more than just movies this time. In her grocery bag was some microwave popcorn and the latest version of her protein shake. Nat had tasted this one, and it didn't seem half bad if drunk shortly after mixing. She planned to have it ready to go in Nick's blender so she could hand it to him as soon as he came in the door.

That's odd, she thought, eyeing the damage to the security panel. *Nick's never had a vandalism problem before.* She hesitated a moment, examining the door, which seemed intact, and the metal window shutters, which were also unmolested. "Looks safe enough..." she said out loud. Despite the fact that it was barely attached to the wall, the panel seemed to be functioning. She keyed in the security code and heard the elevator begin its descent. Nat got in the elevator, rode up to Nick's apartment, and hesitated again before getting out of the elevator. Nick habitually left a light on, and nothing seemed to be out of place, so she stepped out, skirted the living room and went directly to the kitchen to prepare Nick's protein shake.

"PREY!" howled a now-familiar voice inside Shannon's skull. She had known a human was on the way the instant Nat got out of her car. As the elevator arrived, Shannon flew to the balcony and hid in the shadows of the bedroom, hoping that additional distance might help her ignore the ravenous screams of her blood hunger. She tried to deduce who might have come in. *Human, so it's not Nick. Has his security code, so it's somebody close to him. Smells like... formaldehyde? No. Please, not her.* Shannon licked her lips and swallowed, closing her eyes. *Not Natalie.*

A muffled clatter and curse rose from the kitchen. Shannon could feel her fangs starting to descend.

Without realizing it, she had advanced nearly to the top of the stairs. She crouched like a cat, rapt in stalking a mouse. *No. I will not!* she tried to command the hunger. Her eyes grew hot and her vision became tinged with red. A sharp pain cut her to the core. "FOOD!" the beast within her thundered, and Shannon could not resist. She moved fluidly and soundlessly down the stairs and crouched behind the sofa, where she was able to observe Natalie. As her muscles tensed to spring, Shannon managed to whisper a last, defiant "no" before her body launched itself at Natalie.

Nat paused at the sound of the whisper, and turned toward the living room when the whisper was followed by the sound of glass crunching underfoot. "That you, Nick?" she called, taking a couple of steps into the living room.

Shannon, expecting her fangs to be buried deep in a soft throat, was enraged to find that she was instead being held by iron-muscled arms. "Nat -- run! Get out of here!" a voice called out next to her ear.

"Nick? What's going--" Natalie stopped and stared in disbelief at the person with whom Nick was struggling. "My God! Shannon?"

"Nat -- NOW!" Nick's eyes glowed gold, and he bared his fangs as he fought to keep Shannon from her intended meal. Although he had the strength that came with age, Shannon had fed more recently than he -- and on human blood. They were nearly evenly matched.

Nat hurried through the living room, giving a wide berth to the two struggling vampires. But instead of continuing to the elevator, she stopped at an end table and picked up a small wooden box. She gently removed the wooden cross from within it, and, holding it up toward the vampires, approached them. Nick cringed a little, and turned his face away. Shannon dropped to the floor, shaking and cowering.

"Nat, have you lost your mind? And watch where you're pointing that thing," Nick said, shielding his eyes with one hand while keeping a solid grip on Shannon with the other.

Nat ignored him. "Oh Shannon," she said, fighting the impulse to get closer to try to comfort the woman. "Nick, who did this to her?"

Shannon took a shuddering breath. Now she was fighting her hunger and the influence of the cross Nat was holding. "Sorry," she managed to say. "Don't want to--" her thoughts were clear, but her mouth wasn't cooperating. She tried again. "Can't control it. Please, Nat. Go." Shannon's body shook uncontrollably and she hid her face in her hands.

"Now, Nat," Nick added. "Take the cross with you, and go."

If there was anything Nat hated, it was being ordered around. Particularly by people with fangs. "Not before I get some blood and tissue samples," she said, looking around for her doctor's bag.

"Remind me we have to discuss these suicidal tendencies of yours -- some *other* time . . ." He nodded toward the elevator.

"But Nick, think! If I can compare samples from a one-day-old vampire with an eight-hundred-year-old one . . . her blood may hold the key to bringing you back across!"

Nick sighed. "Leave your bag. I'll get the samples." She made no move to leave. "Now! Go before you become dinner."

Nat had lowered the cross and gotten closer to Shannon in her fascination. Shannon felt the searing power ebb a bit and lunged for Nat, nearly breaking free from Nick's hold on her. Nat quickly raised the cross again and backed up as fast as she could toward the elevator. "Okay! Okay! I'm convinced. I'll call later." She got into the elevator, still brandishing the cross.

Nick held Shannon down until he heard Nat's car start. He got up and went into the kitchen, ignored the nearly-completed protein shake, and took two bottles of blood out of the refrigerator. Shannon stayed curled up on the floor.

"They should have just killed me."

"I'm surprised they didn't. They usually do kill mortals who know too much." He gently raised her to a sitting position, and gave her a bottle of blood. "Here. Most fledglings are starved their first night. Drink up -- I've got plenty."

Shannon stared at the bottle. "Anyone I know?"

"Not unless you pal around with cows."

She pulled the cork out with her teeth, took a sip and grimaced. Then she shuddered and drained the rest of the bottle without stopping.

"Better?" Nick asked, handing her the other bottle.

"It takes the edge off, but it doesn't satisfy the hunger the way--" She broke off, unable to continue. Tears welled up in her eyes. "How can you live like this?" The tears spilled over, tracing pink-tinged trails down her cheeks, and she began to sob.

Nick put his arms around her and stroked her hair. "Shhh. Shannon, I know this is tough for you. But it gets better. I swear it does. You've done very well for your first night, considering the circumstances under which you were brought across. I've never seen a new vampire show any kind of control over her hunger the way you did."

Shannon pulled back from Nick's embrace. "Oh yeah? Tell that to the two people I killed tonight."

"You woke up starved, and instinctively attacked the nearest food source. You had no choice--"

"They didn't have any choice, either. I took all choices away from them when I drained their blood and ripped off their heads to hide the fang marks." She got up and leaned her head against the wall. "I can't live like this, Nick," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. "I can't exist like some kind of parasite, preying on humankind."

"It doesn't have to be like that, Shannon." Nick sighed. "Things look pretty bleak right now, but wait until tomorrow night. I'll take some time off work and teach you the basics. I can show you how to survive *without* human blood. Then we can go see Larry Merlin and get you set up with another identity."

She laughed humorlessly, and uncorked the second bottle. "Yeah, I suppose going to work in my condition is out of the question, isn't it?"

"I'd suggest telling them you've gotten some sudden serious illness, or maybe that you're quitting entirely. Getting used to your condition will take some time. And working closely with mortals is probably

not a good idea until you have better control of the beast."

"And Merlin will help me start a new life?" she asked, skepticism in her voice. She drank down the second bottle.

"Absolutely. And who knows? You're the first person ever to track him, not to mention coming close to catching him. Maybe he'll hire you as his assistant."

Shannon thought for a few moments, and then gasped. "The Enforcers stole only the backup copy of my data. The files are still on my PC at work. Nick, you've got to see that they're wiped. I won't have more people killed over this if I can prevent it," she said urgently.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of that for you."

She seemed to relax a little at his reassuring tone. "Come to think of it, Merlin might be interested in seeing what I had on him. Let me write down the directions for copying the files before you wipe them. Got some paper?"

"Sure." Nick picked up the two empties, and brought two more full bottles from the kitchen, along with paper and a pen. Shannon sat down on the couch, hunched over the coffee table, and quickly began to write.

"It'll be dawn soon," Nick observed. "I'd better get that skylight covered." He picked up a couple of pieces of art board from his collection of painting supplies, and rummaged through a toolbox for a hammer and nails.

Shannon interrupted her feverish writing for a moment. "Don't forget about the samples you promised Natalie." She began filling another page with closely-spaced printing.

"You're right. I nearly forgot," Nick said, and put the boards down. "She'll probably try to come and take them herself if I don't call and tell her they're ready." He picked up Nat's doctor's bag and took out two test tubes, a needle, and a disposable scalpel. "I hope you don't mind doing them yourself -- I'm a bit squeamish about needles."

She raised an eyebrow, and finished the page she was working on. "No problem," she said, taking the medical paraphernalia from Nick. She quickly filled one vial with her blood, and then used the scalpel to cut a half-inch cube of flesh out of her forearm. The wound had already begun to heal before she capped the test tube.

Shannon stifled a yawn. "So, where is the guest coffin?"

Nick smiled. "You go ahead and sleep in the bedroom. I'll take the couch out here." He had gotten half the skylight covered and was about to nail the second board into place.

"I'll just put these samples in the fridge," Shannon said, and disappeared into the kitchen.

Nick was caught totally off guard as Shannon flew up and out of the kitchen toward the ceiling and took him down in a mid-air blind-side tackle. The instant they hit the floor, Shannon was up and flying back toward the half-sealed skylight where the first light of dawn was beginning to filter in.

"Shannon, no!" Nick yelled, and flew up to try to stop her. He grabbed hold of one foot and pulled. A

well-aimed kick connected with his head. This time, with the additional advantage of having fed only a few minutes before, Shannon was able to break free of Nick's grip and climb out on to the roof.

The sun cleared the horizon, and Shannon was nearly blinded by its sudden glare. Her exposed skin began to sizzle, redden, and finally char as she ran across the roof and tried to fly into the blazing ball of fire as it rose in the sky.

The burned-out cinder of her body nearly landed on Nat, who had driven only a few blocks away and was walking back to Nick's. There was nothing recognizable but Shannon's clothes by the time she hit the ground. Tears welled up in Nat's eyes as she knelt beside the smoking ashes of Shannon's body.

A figure dressed in a heavy coat, hat, gloves and scarf burst out of Nick's building and ran to Nat's side. "Shannon . . ." Nick whispered. "It didn't have to end like this. You let them win. You let the bastards win." Blood tears soaked the scarf that covered Nick's face. They started to steam in the morning sun.

"Nick, come inside." Nat pulled on his sleeve, but it was like trying to nudge a redwood tree. "You're starting to smoke. Come on, you're not doing her any good." She pulled again. This time Nick relented and let Nat tug him toward the building. He turned at the doorway, taking one last look before Nat pushed him inside.

Tombstone, Arizona 1881

Nick had cut things a little too close last night. He'd been tracking a missing horse out near the Contention mine, and nearly got caught in the sun. Fortunately he was able to find a tunnel that wasn't being used, and had gotten some rest during the day. On the way back to town, he passed the mine's office, and heard a familiar sound.

Not again! he thought as he noticed a hole in the roof. This time, Nick used the door, and crept right up behind the vampire. "Didn't you learn anything the last time?" Nick whispered in his ear.

The safe cracker jumped. "What're you talkin' about? What's the problem? It's just *their* money -- human money." He turned his attention to the contents of the safe, stuffing a couple of saddlebags full. "We're the same, you and me."

"No, we're not. Not the same at all. I'm the law. You're a thief." Nick let his fangs descend. He grabbed the safe cracker by the scruff of the neck and threw him against the wall. "I suggest you come along quietly. I'm much older and stronger than you, and I wouldn't want to hurt you."

The younger vampire got up cautiously from the floor. He was so unnerved by Nick's attack that he didn't even vamp out in response. "Now, just one minute --"

"You know, through all the centuries, I've found that humans always enjoy watching a good hanging," Nick said with a bitter smile, remembering another time and place. He slowly approached the other vampire. "And this one will be so much more exciting for the crowd. They'll get to see you sizzle and burn before the hangman pulls the lever --"

"You're crazy!" The safe cracker began looking desperately around him for somewhere, *anywhere* to escape. Nick began herding him toward the back of the room.

"Crazy? No, I'm just the law. Now, you can come with me to face the sun and the noose, or -- you can leave now, and never show your face in this territory again." Nick had backed him up until he was almost directly under the hole in the ceiling. "Because if you do, rest assured that I'll find you. I'll be the one to bring you in. And you'll burn. I'll see to it. You will burn."

"Okay! Okay! I promise!" the other vampire blurted, and took his only way out -- up through the hole.

"I believe you're forgetting something," Nick called up to the fleeing safe cracker. The saddlebags dropped through the hole. "Good fledgling. You're learning."

Nick turned to replace the stolen money in the safe, and was surprised by the sound of applause. LaCroix stepped out of the shadows. "Bravo. A stellar performance. But tell me, Nicholas, what would you have done if he called your bluff, hmmm? What if I'd told him about the Enforcers, and what they would do to *you* if you dared arrest him?"

"Ah, but you didn't," said Nick, smiling bitterly. "In fact, I counted on it. You've never been one for giving the whole story to those you turn."

"Touche. So, Nicholas, you're that serious about protecting these sheep?"

That got his attention. Nick stopped what he was doing and turned to face LaCroix. "Not 'sheep.' Humans. *My* humans." He came closer, eyes golden and fangs bared. "They're under my protection. *Leave them alone, LaCroix!*"

"You've become absolutely possessive about them, haven't you?" LaCroix's surprise quickly turned to anger. He sneered at Nick. "It's a pity you don't feel the same loyalty toward your own kind." He disappeared with a snarl.

* * *

Nick maneuvered his Caddy into one of the few empty spaces left near the Raven. Despite the number of cars which made it clear there was a crowd inside, the club was much quieter than usual from the outside. As he walked up, Nick noticed a small, black-bordered sign attached to the front door which read, "Closed For Private Party." Alma was stationed just inside the door to discourage the uninvited, and she nodded to Nick as he entered. The music was more subdued than usual, and the attendees were milling about, drinking and eating, but not dancing. Janette, ever-present glass in hand, walked up to meet him.

"'Private party'? Really, Janette, I thought you had more respect for the dead."

"Nicolah, the idea was to discourage gatecrashers, no? I thought putting 'wake' on the sign would draw a crowd. Especially if they were to take it literally." Her attempt to lighten Nick's mood a failure, she changed the subject. "Anyway with all these cops here, it'll be weeks before business recovers. Some of my regulars may never return." She looked around at the assemblage. "Such a vulgar idea: throwing a party to celebrate someone's true death . . ."

Nick took the glass from Janette's hand and drank down half the contents, to Janette's utter amazement. "Tradition, Janette. We always give one of our own a big sendoff," he said, with a bitter smile.

A tall, thin, redheaded man joined them. "Evening Janette, Nick."

"Larry. I didn't expect to see you here," Nick said quietly.

Merlin also lowered his voice so that only a vampire could hear it. "I wanted to thank you for the data. I wish I could have met Ms. McGee under other circumstances. She's the only person to come close to nailing me. Nobody else has ever suspected a thing."

"So you're here to gloat, then?" Janette put in.

His deep-set eyes flashed angrily at the insult. "Quite the contrary. I'm here to pay my respects. Her work showed her to have an extraordinary mind . . . It's a pity she didn't have the temperament to stay with us."

Nick was distracted, scanning the crowd. He picked up a bit of a conversation across the room.

"But to set herself on fire, and then jump . . . What a horrible way to go."

"McGee always was thorough. I remember one time when she was a beat cop on Yonge Street --"

Schanke. And a couple of sheets to the wind, from the sound of him.

Nick excused himself, and headed toward the corner of the bar where Schanke was perched, a bit unsteadily, on a barstool. His progress was stopped by a familiar touch on his arm, and a voice in his ear.

"Nick? How are you holding up?" Nat stood in front of him, looking concerned. She eyed him more closely, wishing the bar were better lit, and then frowned. "Nick--"

Nick pulled her into a quick hug and whispered, "Thanks for cooking the autopsies on the decapitations -- and Shannon," before releasing her.

"No problem," she responded in a voice that clearly said that there was indeed a problem. "Nick, your eyes . . ."

With an effort, Nick toned down the golden glow in his eyes, and checked to make sure his fangs weren't showing as well.

"What have you been drinking?" Nat asked, reaching for his glass.

Nick pulled his arm away, keeping the glass just out of Nat's reach. "Janette's private stock." He took a long, defiant sip from the glass and moved it away from Nat again.

She stared at him in disbelief, mouth gaping open. "Have you lost your mind?" she whispered. "After all the progress you've made, to just--"

He reached over and set his fingers gently on Nat's lips, stopping her righteous tirade. His expression was cold and hard. "One glass. Just one. Shannon deserves to be toasted with only the best." Nat began to protest again, but he cut her off. "I appreciate your concern, but I'd be more worried about Schanke right now. He's taking this hard." He nodded in Schanke's direction, drawing Nat's attention away from himself. When she turned back, Nick was gone.

"Extra garlic in the next protein shake," she muttered to herself.

A young uniformed cop Nick recognized from the night shift saw Nick approaching and vacated the

barstool next to Schanke. She looked relieved to escape. Nick quickly took the seat, slipped an arm around Schanke's shoulders and gave one a squeeze. "How're you doing, partner?"

Schanke gulped down the rest of his glass of whiskey, and signaled the bartender for another. The detective shook his head. "I can't believe it, Nick. I just can't believe it. What would make her crack like that? To fabricate the evidence on that superhacker, and then try to implicate you? It just doesn't make any sense." The bartender brought over his drink, and Schanke started in on it.

"She chased that guy for four years, remember. The stress must have overwhelmed her, so she felt like she had to close the case at any cost. At least she realized what she'd done and came clean in the end."

"In a suicide note," Schanke snorted. 'Let the profession and myself down.' Dammit, Knight, she had everything to live for."

"Schanke --"

"I know, I know. It's just that, seeing her start out here, so bright, so *good* at being a cop . . . I never expected to be at her wake. Especially under these circumstances." He took another gulp of his whiskey, and stood up unsteadily. "I think it's time for the toast." He struck a spoon against his glass to get the attention of the crowd.

"I'd like to thank all of you for coming tonight to honor the memory of Shannon McGee. Some of you remember her from her previous service here in Toronto. Others only got to know her in the brief time she was here. But I'm sure that all of you will agree with me that she was a generous and giving person, quick with a smile, and one hell of a good cop." Schanke paused, almost daring someone to disagree with his last assertion. "We can't pretend to know what was going on in her mind that led to --" he swallowed and continued, "that led to our being here tonight. But we can share our memories of her with each other. And we can raise our glasses in her honor."

Nick rose and stood behind Schanke as he raised his glass and offered the toast. "To Shannon McGee: one of Chicago's -- and Toronto's -- finest."

"To Shannon," voices in the crowd answered.

"I hope she's at peace now," Schanke added in a whisper before drinking.

"Amen," said Nick softly, and drained his glass.

The End

author's notes: I started working on this story in the fall of 1994, so there are some aspects of it that might not reflect what's been seen in the second season. (F'r instance, I had a higher opinion of Nick's skills as a novice lawman that the writer of Amateur Night.) Also, the story takes place during the time frame of the first season, hence the 37th precinct, and the presence of Stonetree and Larry Merlin rather than Amanda Cohen and Aristotle.

In the Tombstone flashbacks, Billy "Breck" Breakenridge and "Crazy Horse Lil" were real people.

*I have the books **Tombstone, myth & reality** by Odie Faulk, **And die in the West** by Paula Marks, and **Hellorado** by Breck himself to thank for background information, plus the really nice "Wyatt Earp's Old West" CD-ROM for general atmosphere.*

There may well be a Greek restaurant named Zorba's in Toronto, but the one I had in mind is near Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C. Rizogalo to die for, the souvlaki ain't half bad, but the lamajuhn is my personal favorite (even if I can't spell it).

—Siobhan

"You Are Old, Lucien Lacroix"

by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons

(An FK take on "You are Old, Father William" from Alice in Wonderland)

"You are old, Lucien Lacroix," the young mortal said,
"And you've lived a long while past your prime.
And yet you incessantly rise from the dead,
To harass your young partner-in-crime!"

"As a Roman," Lacroix replied with a glare,
"I ordered vast troops to their death.
Though I'm dead now myself, I really don't care,
To complain now is not worth the breath."

"You are old," said the mortal, "and set in your ways,
The purveyor of trouble and strife!
Yet you keep yourself busy through all the long days
And each decade, you pick a new life!"

"For a vampire, it's true," said the unending one,
"The nights are forever and ever!
When the ennui's too much, I'll walk into the sun,
But to do so now wouldn't be clever!"

"You are old," cried the mortal, his finger a-shake,
"And you've been a most un-contrite cad!
Yet you're only depressed at the thought of a stake--
Why so cheerful, although you're so bad?"

"Yes, it's so," said the ancient, who cruelly smiled,
"I am happy, except now and then,
Only Nicholas knows how to get me all riled
He provokes me again and again!"

"You are old," said the mortal, who then looked away,
"You love blood, and I'm not talking 'cow'!
And yet you admire the music we play,
Tell me who is the hypocrite now?"

"I have answered three questions, and you're out of luck,"
Said the vampire, his eyes glowing yellow.
"I've been looking for someone whose blood I could suck,
So come here, my fine, meddlesome fellow!"

None so Blind

by Diane Trap

"Hey, Nick! You ever see one of these?"

Schanke handed him a softcover book with the cover folded back. Nick looked down at the open page.

"What is this?" he asked in distaste, closing his eyes against the rhythmic pattern of red and blue dots.

"It's a book of those 3-D things. I'm giving it to Jenny for her birthday -- she loves 'em." Grinning, Schanke sat down at his desk. "Can't you see it?"

It was a quiet night at the station, no phones ringing, only a few people moving about. A high winter wind rattled the station house's windows. Nick risked a second peek at the design. "See what?"

"You're looking at it wrong," Schanke told him. "Hold it in front of your nose and focus on one point of the picture."

Nick did. Up close, the dots didn't make him so dizzy.

"Now pull the book slowly away from your face, and voila!"

At half an arm's length away, the dots began to spin again. Nick shook his head to clear it. "Voila *what?*"

"Leaping lizards!" Schanke exclaimed. "Gila monsters in three dimensions!"

Nick tried it again, but its only effect on him was to send a queasy wave rolling through his stomach. "You're serious about this, Skank?"

Schanke's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Don't tell me the great detective Nick Knight--"

"Gentlemen?"

Nick put the picture down, glad of the interruption. Captain Cohen was coming toward them, with Natalie, all bundled up in her Easter-egg-blue down coat with the fuzzy white scarf, just a step behind her.

Nat picked up the book. "I love these things! Is this yours, Nick?"

"Weather reports say a real blizzard's coming in," the Captain told them. "The order's come down to send all non-essential personnel home -- Myers and Brankowski drew the short straw to stay, so that means you. Good thing the bad guys don't come out in this weather."

Nat had the book about twelve centimeters in front of her. A silly grin spread over her face. "This is great!"

"It's Schanke's," Nick said hastily.

"Nick can't see it," Schanke added.

"My daughter likes those things, but *she's* six," Cohen said. "You two had better head out if you don't want to get stuck here."

Schanke was on his feet in an instant. "Snow day with Jenny! Soap operas and Myra's special cocoa with that little drop of ouzo!" He reached for his coat. "Try the next one, Nat, it's really good."

Natalie looked at the next page, laughed, and passed the book to Captain Cohen. Nick watched in amazement as the Captain put it to her nose, brought it away from her face, and actually smiled before she gave it back to Nat. "I'll see you folks tomorrow. Drive safe."

She walked away. Natalie held out the book. "Nick?"

He tried, he really did, holding the book to his face and bringing it away just as Schanke had said, staring until he felt like his chair was rocking beneath him.

"You mean you really can't see it, Nick?" Natalie asked.

He looked up. There was a big, broad smile on her face. Schanke caught her eye and they both laughed. Nick glanced down at the red and green blotches marching across the page. The word *HUMAN* rang through his head like the devil had shouted it in his ear. He shivered.

"Sure I can," he said.

"Yeah, right," Schanke retorted, pulling a pair of moose-head earmuffs over his ears.

"You just need practice," Nat said, with galling kindness.

Schanke topped the earmuffs with a red-and-white striped stocking cap. "Well, I'm outta here, folks. Keep the book, Nick -- Jenny's birthday isn't for another week." He chuckled as he left them, shaking his head.

Nick closed the book. There was another one of those awful things on the cover.

"Want to get snowed in at my place?" Natalie suggested. "See some videos? Roast some marshmallows? I'll make s'mores."

They had roasted marshmallows once before; Nick had gagged on the sweet, sticky stuff and burnt his lip on the toasting stick. He didn't even want to guess what "s'mores" might be. He looked up at Natalie and even the sight of her sweet face couldn't banish the sound of the word *HUMAN* again, whispered this time.

3-D pictures. Daughters. Cocoa. S'mores. Human things. Nick swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth and got to his feet. "Uh, no, thanks." He tapped the book. "I think I'll go home and 'practice' this."

Natalie's eyes widened; her face fell.

"I want to check on Janette," Nick added quickly. "She doesn't like storms."

That certainly wasn't the right thing to say. "Sure," Natalie snapped, and slung her handbag over her

shoulder. She started to go.

"Call me!" Nick called after her. "Let me know you've gotten home all right!"

"Maybe!"

Nick flinched at the look Natalie threw him just before she slammed the door behind her. *Damn.*

* * *

Janette wasn't the one who didn't like storms; as long as she was inside, warm, and dry, she was perfectly willing to let the weather do as it pleased. She barely glanced up from her copy of *Vogue* when Nick came into the Raven, Schanke's book tucked under his arm.

"We're closed," she said briefly, and turned a page. She was sitting on one bar stool, her feet propped up on another. She was wearing a black crushed velvet catsuit with bits of fur at the collar and cuffs; she looked like Santa's wicked elf, the one in charge of putting coal in bad children's stockings.

From the far side of the bar, Miklos looked up from his sweeping. "Can I get you something, Nick?"

"No, thanks." Nick shook snow out of his hair and blew on his fingers. He could have wished for a better moment to discover a leak in the Caddy's ragtop than on his drive over here.

"I can't imagine what you might need on a night like this," Janette added.

"Do I have to need anything to come see you?" Nick gave her his most winsome smile, and crossed the floor to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"What else brings you here?" She looked at him severely. "Your lips are chapped."

Nick's smile wavered. He pulled a stool up beside her, leaving the book on the bar, and sat down. "Spring fashions?"

Janette sniffed. "Such as they are."

Miklos started sweeping again. Nick fidgeted, but Janette only turned another page. At her elbow was an Irish coffee cup, decorated with a slice of lemon and a cinnamon stick.

Nick pointed. "What's that?"

"Something Alma invented. Mulled blood."

"Mulled . . . ?"

Janette looked over her magazine. "Would you like one?"

"Mulled . . . ?"

Janette held Nick's gaze for a long moment. Her eyes began to sparkle, and then she laughed, and laughed, setting down her magazine and holding on to the bar for support. "The look on your face, Nicola!"

The tension began to ease from Nick's shoulders. His winsome smile grew into a genuine grin. "Mulled blood?"

"Oh, it's terrible!" Janette gasped and put her hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles. "And she was so proud of it--!"

Her laughter warmed him, from his frozen toes to a place inside him he hadn't realized was cold. He started to laugh himself, stopped with a start when he realized he was out of practice at it, and laughed again.

"Miklos!" Janette waved her assistant over. "We need something to drink."

Nick sobered as Miklos propped his broom against the wall and walked behind the bar. Janette drank human blood, and happy as he was that she had welcomed him at last, he wasn't ready to join her--

"Bring us *Nicola's* bottle," Janette ordered Miklos, her eyebrows raised in wicked curves. A corner of Miklos' mouth twitched; he reached into a cooler and pulled out a clear wine bottle filled with something red.

"This is very special," he said to Nick as he pulled the cork. He filled a glass and set it in front of him. "It is a gift, for you."

Nick took the glass, sniffing at it cautiously. It wasn't human . . . he took a sip. "It's--"

"It's pig!" Janette announced triumphantly.

Nick started, his mouth full, and swallowed with an effort. "Pig?"

"Pig! I've tasted it -- it's much better than cow, is it not?"

It was much better than cow, so much better Nick wasn't sure he ought to be drinking it. He took another swallow.

"I wouldn't have thought of it myself. One of the staff brought it in, just for you." Janette leaned forward and half-sang, "A person with a crush on you!"

"On me?" Nick put the glass on the bar. "A crush on me? Who?"

"I am sworn to secrecy."

Nick looked at Miklos, but the bartender shrugged and turned away. Nick turned back to Janette and demanded, "Who?"

Janette shook her head and made a little gesture in front of her lips like she was turning a key in a lock.

"Janette--"

"No!"

"Janette . . ." Nick raised his hands and wiggled his fingers.

Her eyes widened. "Nicola . . ."

He reached forward.

"Nicola, no!"

He danced his fingers up and down her ribs, pushing away her hands as she fought him off. She twisted her body, giggling hysterically; Nick shouted with laughter. "Tell!"

"No!" She shrieked and arched backward. Her elbow hit Schanke's book and knocked it to the floor. "Nicola! I'll never tell!"

She wouldn't; after eight hundred years Nick knew that well enough. He put his hands on the bar, trapping her in the circle of arms. Her bosom heaved as she gasped for breath; her hair had fallen out of its pins; her blue eyes shone. A smile quivered on her lips. Nick leaned in . . . and backed away, letting her go.

He bent down to pick up the book. Janette sat up. Her head down, she began to pull out her hairpins, letting her dark curls cover her face. She combed her fingers through her hair and looked up.

"What is that?" she asked, her voice neutral, the expression in her eyes carefully guarded.

"Something of Schanke's." Nick shrugged and handed it to her. "The pictures are supposed to come out in three dimensions if you look at them right."

She looked at the picture on the cover. Her lip curled. "Really?"

"You have to hold it to your nose and then bring it away from you." Nick picked up his glass and swallowed the pig's blood in one gulp. "Focus on one part of the picture first."

Janette opened the book's covers and squinted at the caption on the first page. "Hundreds of Gilas."

She held the book up, moved it away, held it up and moved it away. Nick reached for the bottle and refilled his glass. She wouldn't look at him; he could feel her hurt. He was hurting, too, with the bone-deep ache of someone who'd been caught too long between a rock and a hard place. He looked into the depths of his glass. He didn't belong anywhere.

"Gilas," Janette repeated carefully.

"I couldn't see them," Nick admitted. "Nat and Schanke could."

Janette pressed her lips together; she closed the book, set it in her lap, and folded her hands on top of it. Nick looked back into his glass. He could lie to himself, but he couldn't lie to her; Janette would know that he had come here because he hadn't felt accepted by his human friends, and she would know that he had backed away just now because he hadn't been able to accept her. He deserved to be tossed out into the snow, and he hoped she'd belt him one when she did it.

"Do you remember," Janette said, "That art dealer in Los Angeles? Back in the seventies?"

Nick nodded cautiously.

"He wanted 'op art.'" She told the story like she was reciting it in a pageant. "You found an optometry

textbook and painted all the astigmatism tests on enormous canvases."

"And you made him pay through the nose," Nick said.

She looked at him, her mouth twisted ruefully. "And you gave the money away." She shook her head in exasperation. "*Nicola*."

* * *

She smiled and patted the stool next to her. Nick took a deep breath and sat down.

Janette ruffled the corners of the book. "Do you really think these work?"

"Schanke said they did."

"I would not take Schanke's word for anything." With a sigh Janette opened the book and leafed through the pages. "Hundreds of Gilas' -- 'Dozens of Donkeys' -- 'Zillions of Zebras.' Oh, for heaven's sake, Nicola, *why* would you want to be human again?"

Nick sat up. "Because--"

Janette held up the book and shook her head, clucking her tongue. Nick grinned, then chuckled. "Okay. I'm not crazy about lawn flamingoes either. Or Hawaiian shirts. Or moose earmuffs--"

"Moose earmuffs?"

Before Nick could answer the front door opened, banging against the wall, driven by a gust of wind. A dark figure emerged from a swirl of snow; Janette started up, motioning Miklos back to the shadows.

"You weren't out in this weather!" she exclaimed.

LaCroix took off his black fedora and brushed snow from the brim with three short, sharp blows with the back of his leather-gloved hand. He untied the black scarf that was wrapped around the lower part of his face.

"Who knows what evil lurks in the heart of men," Nick muttered, and reached for his glass. They had been snowed in together before, more than once in their long history; with LaCroix, cabin fever was a fatal disease expressed in symptoms of torture and killing. When you had lived through a blizzard with LaCroix you knew you had stared into the eyes of death and worse.

"I have a radio show," LaCroix said. "A responsibility that does not end because the rest of the city decides to hide from the weather."

"Some things are beyond control," Nick replied. "Even your control."

LaCroix exhaled, slowly, his nostrils flaring. "It's so quiet in here, Janette. Where are your customers? I miss the sound of money ringing into your till."

Janette handed Nick Schanke's book and slid off the stool. "I can afford a quiet night," she answered flatly. "Would you like something?"

"What a lucky girl you are," LaCroix murmured. He drew nearer to the bar; Janette automatically went behind it. "And what is our Nicholas having?" LaCroix reached for the bottle, sniffed at it. His eyebrows rose. He put the bottle down. "I am surprised at you, Nicholas -- or is one to believe that the snow lays down crime like the dirt?"

Jibes about his choice of career Nick could take. He would have cut out his tongue before admitting to drinking pig. Cow sounded much more noble.

"And what have you there?" LaCroix reached for the book and flipped through the pages.

"They're . . . puzzles," Janette said. She had poured herself a large helping of her usual vintage; she drank half and topped up the glass.

LaCroix was reading something. Nick leaned over to take a look. He hadn't realized the book came with instructions.

LaCroix held the book to his nose. Nick looked over his shoulder to exchange a glance with Janette. She looked away. The corners of her mouth trembled.

"They're quite fascinating," she said.

LaCroix moved the book slowly away from his face. He put it down with a frown, muttering, "Gilas." He demanded of Nick, "And these are supposed to appear in three dimensions?"

Nick took a swallow of pig's blood. "Can't you see it?"

LaCroix turned a page, tried again. His brow creased; he blinked and rubbed his eyes.

"It's amazing," Janette was moving about behind the bar, rearranging glasses, wiping clean ashtrays. "I can't imagine how they're done."

"Computers," Nick told her. He didn't dare look at her, let alone catch her eye.

"Really?"

LaCroix glared at them both. He turned another page, and then another.

"The one on page fifteen is quite easy," Janette offered. "Dozens of Donkeys, wasn't it, Nicola?"

"Zillions of Zebras," he corrected her.

LaCroix turned more pages, the movement of his hands elaborately casual. Nick thought he might really be turning to page fifteen, but he couldn't bear to look to be sure.

A tiny squeak of laughter escaped Janette. She tried to turn it into a cough, but LaCroix had heard her; he froze, and closed the book. He gave them both a glare that by rights should have turned them to ash faster than a rising sun.

He ripped the book into halves, the halves into quarters, the quarters into shreds, and the shreds into confetti that he scattered across the floor.

"I would have thought you were too old to play with such toys, children," he hissed through his teeth. He flung his scarf around his neck and was gone, the door slammed behind him with a force that shook the building.

Janette came out from behind the bar, keeping a grip on it like someone who had just discovered how drunk she really was. "We will pay for that, I suppose," she said, and started to giggle. She staggered to Nick's side and clutched his arm, laying her head on his shoulder as she laughed.

Nick looked down at the scraps of paper scattered over the floor. "That was Schanke's book--"

"Buy him another," Janette gasped. "Buy him a dozen -- dozens -- dozens of donkeys! It was worth it!"

Nick put his arm around her as she laughed herself into hiccups. It had been centuries, he thought, since he had heard her laugh like that.

Miklos heaved a heavy sigh and picked up his broom.

The End

Many thanks to those people on FORKNI-L who discussed pig's blood, and my apologies for not knowing your names.

Just for the record, I can't make those stupid 3-D pictures work either.

Hill of Crows

by M. E. Orive

She *didn't* look up from her *drink* when he came in, but continued to run her finger along the brim of the glass.

"Where is he? I know he's here . . . Janette, where *is* he?"

She still didn't look up, but pointed to the back of the nightclub. He swept by her, his every movement announcing his anger.

"You're welcome," she whispered, after he left. She couldn't think about them tonight, couldn't think about what they would fight over this time. She took another drink and closed her eyes.

LaCroix was at Janette's beautifully carved desk, looking over some papers. He glanced up when Nick walked into the room, but quickly lowered his gaze again.

"Tell me that is wasn't you," the words came out before Nick even thought about them, before he remembered to word the phrase accusingly.

LaCroix hid his smile. That had sounded just a little too much like a plea.

"Nicholas, my dearest child. How nice of you to visit me in my doddering old age. Let me guess, what could the occasion be?"

"We fished him out of the lake, and I want you to tell me that you didn't kill that boy."

"Certainly," he paused for a second. "I didn't kill that boy."

"You're lying."

"Really, Nicholas, make up your mind."

"You *are* a monster. How can you even think for a moment that I would be content to be as you are, preying on innocents . . ."

"Please, Nicholas, don't pretend to be a greater fool than you are."

LaCroix got up and moved around the desk.

" 'The evil vampires that prey on innocent humanity.' As if there ever was such a thing. And as for being what I am, you were a killer before I ever met you, long before you were brought across, long before you lost your 'humanity'."

He moved closer to Nick, until their faces were only a few inches apart.

"As was I."

* * *

The centurion grabbed the reins of his general's horse, holding the animal's head as the man dismounted onto the frozen ground.

"How goes it?" he asked, as he tried to soothe the horse.

The general removed his helmet and ran a grimy hand through his close-cropped hair, exhaustion showing on his face, making him look older than he was.

"Not well. Two days' march from Lugdunum, and we cannot get reinforcements to save our lives."

Despite the man's words, the centurion felt a sense of relief grow within him, brought on by his leader's mere presence.

"Lucianus, we might try an assault along the crest . . ."

"No, the snow is too deep there. It won't hold a child, much less a man in full gear."

The general began to walk towards the center of their camp. The younger man handed the reins of the horse to a slave and hurried to catch up to him.

"Then a frontal assault, at dawn. We can . . ."

"We will lose another hundred men trying to take that hill from the lower slope. No."

"We have to do something. They grow bolder with each successful raid, and the garrison at Lugdunum can't hold under this kind of pressure."

"I know."

Lucianus walked through the equipment carts, a part of him noting the sound of his footsteps, as they broke the frozen crust of snow. He paused, his attention seemingly on a cart full of cooking gear.

"Do we still have the captives from that village? How many?"

The centurion frowned. "Nearly fifty, including the children. It's bad enough that we're so low on supplies . . ." He looked at the general's face and stopped; the older man didn't seem to be hearing him.

"Lucianus?"

The general looked at his centurion, thinking how much older he seemed now, after these three years.

"Bring them to the front of the lines and kill them. One by one. Make sure that it is visible from the hill crest."

The centurion felt his stomach tighten.

"Lucianus, we cannot, even if they are barbarians . . ."

"Now. I *will not* lose any more men on this foolish assault. They will surrender when they see what we

do." The general had already started walking away, the cold winter wind blowing his long cloak around him.

"Sir," the centurion followed him, grabbing at his shoulder. "The gods will not forgive us this, Rome will . . ."

"Their blood will be on my hands. If the gods want me, they know where they can find me."

The general pulled away, leaving the dark-haired young man staring after him. He knew the centurion would carry out his orders. Gods, how he hated this place. Hated the cold, hated every cursed rock, almost as much as he had hated Palestine. He sighed and thought again of that dry soil, of the heat, of the smell of death, how the ground soaked up the blood spilled there. Like a beast that lived from drinking blood.

He swore an oath as he walked, cursing Palestine and Gaul and every damned league that lay between them.

* * *

Nick turned away from LaCroix, not meeting his eyes.

"I was a crusader, a soldier. I fought for . . ."

" . . . God and the Holy Church, yes, I know. And I for Mother Rome. And we both know what fools we were, don't we. For god and honor and country."

"Am I suppose to take a lesson from you now?" Nick walked away, keeping his back to LaCroix. "To know better and value nothing? Not honor, not life, not morality? And then what do we believe in, LaCroix?"

LaCroix was beside him in a second, with that speed that seems like magic to mortal eyes. "We have *ourselves*. We decide, we choose, and no one chooses for us."

* * *

The senator smiled at the message he had just received. General Lucianus, returned from Gaul, here to see him. A man as ruthless as he was successful, almost as ruthless as himself. They say, he mused, that the carrion crows follow him everywhere.

The general came into the room a few minutes later, still wearing breastplate and greaves, the senator noted with another smile. Military men and their affectations.

"I don't understand this," began Lucianus.

"My dear general, how good it is to see you. I am so glad that you are well, we had heard . . ."

"How could you do this?" Lucianus was furious. The senator sighed, he didn't enjoy dealing with this man when he was angry.

"Lucianus, you are a soldier. An excellent soldier, my very favorite soldier. But the intricacies of policy . . ."

Lucianus slammed his fist on the inlaid table between them, silencing the senator. The man's pale eyes tried to hold the senator's dark ones.

"You are giving up the garrison northeast of Lugdunum; that will give the hills *back* to that barbarian . . ."

"Calm yourself."

"It leaves the town completely exposed! I lost hundreds of men taking those hills, it took three year . . ."

"All deeply appreciated, of course."

"They were Roman soldiers, they were *my* men, they . . ."

"They were expendable," the senator finished for him. "Lucianus, at the time a major victory in the occupied territories was an absolute political necessity. Things change. We have more important things to attend to, you and I."

The general stared at the senator, his breathing uneven. Then he looked to the courtyard, trying to see it clearly, and not to see the frozen hills northeast of Lugdunum. There was a fountain, he noted, the water made a pleasant sound. When he spoke again, his voice was very soft, so that the senator had to strain to hear his words.

"I put twenty captives to death, half of them children. I had their throats cut." He looked back at the senator.

"These things happen, Lucianus. We all know what a dedicated servant you have been. Now, perhaps you should go and rest. We can always discuss things when you are . . . calmer."

Lucianus continued staring. It occurred to the senator that he really was quite unnerving, with those eyes. He was about to say something, something meant to be soothing, when the general drew his short sword. The man grabbed the blade in both hands, heedless of the blood that began to run down his forearms. The senator could hear the water from the fountain, and then the clatter of the blade of the floor; only then did he remember to breathe again.

The general held a bloody fist to his chest.

"Ave Caesar," it was almost a snarl.

He turned and walked away, leaving a trail of bright blood on the inlaid mosaic of the floor. The senator leaned heavily against the table, thinking that, excellent soldier or not, the man was quite mad.

* * *

"Did you kill that boy?"

"Does it matter?"

Nick looked at him a long moment. "Yes, it matters."

"Yes, I killed him. Are you going to arrest me?"

Nick felt the rage run through him, turning his eyes golden. Then he turned and left the room, trying to outrun the coldness in his heart.

* * *

"All done?"

"Yes, *cherie*," he laid a brief kiss on her forehead. "All done."

She looked at him carefully, trying to gauge his mood. "Why did you kill that young man?"

LaCroix put on his long coat, his gloves, then looked at her.

"He reminded me of someone."

The door banged shut after him, and he walked through the snow, his black coat flapping like a cloak behind him. He hated the cold, he thought idly, and looked at the frozen ground. For a moment, he had the memory of another frozen place, a young centurion lying on the ground, black blood spreading from the his throat where an arrow was buried. An arrow fletched with crow's feathers. And another young man, his throat torn out.

He thought of the frozen battlefields of winter in Gaul, and the dry dust of Palestine. He remembered how, walking among the dead and the dying, he had fancied that Death walked beside him, just out of view.

"Not anymore," he said aloud to the night. "Now, I *am* Death."

The End

author's note: Lugdunum was the Roman name for what is now Lyon, in the east of France. It was founded in 43 BC and soon after became the capital of the occupied province of Gaul. The name Lugdunum means "hill of the crow".

LucienLaCwocky by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons

T'was sundown, and the Ravenettes
Were to-and-frugging in the yard.
The sneaking Cousins all took bets
That the FoDlettes died-hard.

"Beware Lucien LaCroix, mon cher,
The cunning plots, the words that hurt.
Beware him, though he's notre pere,
Like the Ripper's blood-spurt!"

He took his sharpened stake in hand,
Long time his sanguine foe he sought,
He drove his car to the Raven-bar
And sat awhile, in thought.

And as in brickish thought he sat,
Lucien LaCroix, his eyes a-flame,
Smiled toothily, like the Cheshire Cat,
A-cursing as he came.

Oh, no! Oh, no! You so-and-so!
The sharpened stake sliced, as he'd feared!
Right through the wall, but, after all,
His foe had . . . disappeared!

"You think you've slain Lucien LaCroix?
Nicola, cher, are you for real?
O, zut alors! Combatte de hors!"
She tried to cop a feel.*

T'was sundown, and the Ravenettes
Were to-and-frugging in the yard.
The sneaking Cousins all took bets
That the FoDlettes died-hard.

** Or feel a cop?*

(I have no idea what "combatte de hors" means, except I think I once saw it somewhere, and it kind of fits.)

In the Black

by Susan M. Garrett

Natalie unlocked her apartment door, happy that Sidney would be at the vet until tomorrow. Nick had promised to paint that orange wall while she was in Chicago.

Walking inside, she clicked on the light switch.

Nothing. It was still dark.

She used the door frame for reference, then banged her shin on . . . furniture? The light, when she found it, was filtered through a black screen, setting off the black on black wallpaper, the black carpeting, the black ceiling and the stainless steel couch and chairs that had replaced her old furniture. Stumbling to the phone, she dialed.

"Yeah, Nick Knight, I'm--"

"Nick, pick up. It's Nat."

A sleepy voice answered, "Welcome back. How was your--?"

"Get over here. Now."

"Now?" He yawned. "The sun just rose, Nat. Isn't it . . . okay?"

"You haven't seen it? The chains I can use when it snows--"

"Chains?"

"But the whips are a bit much--"

"Whips?"

"I think that's a bondage mask--"

"I'm on my way."

Slamming the receiver in the cradle, Natalie picked up a card from the table -- 'Interiors By Alma' -- and crushed it in her fist.

The End

A CHRISTMAS TRYPTICH

*The fiction list has been in existence for a couple of years now, and like the rest of the world our talented listmembers cannot ignore Christmas. (Witness the special issue published last October, **Forever Net Before Christmas** -- 140 pages of only Christmas stories!)*

Three of this year's finest entries are represented in the following pages, by two of our most notable authors, Pamela Rush and Susan Garrett.

The first deals with the tradition of "Christmas Shopping" as Pam follows our favorite vampires and their human friends into a lingerie store. Susan's story is one close to my heart as a long-time cat "mumme" as it features a cat, a Christmas tree, and a visit from someone bearing absolutely NO resemblance to Saint Nick! The third is a sequel of sorts to our first story and deals with another Christmas tradition -- overindulgence! The consequences for Nat (and, by extension, Nick) are . . . interesting.

Christmas does, indeed, bring out a playful side of both our authors and the FK characters.

'Twas a Nightie for Christmas

by Pamela Rush

Natalie was laughing at the expression on Nick's face as he caught the full impact of the store sign: it was so covered with cupids and curlicues, flowers and flourishes that the lettering was barely decipherable as "Naughty Nighties."

"Come on," she insisted, pulling on his arm, "it won't bite!"

Nick had seemed almost enthusiastic when Natalie had suggested Christmas shopping as a very human sort of thing to practice on; fortunately, the evenings grew dark well before the shops closed at this season. He had been unflustered by the difficulties of docking the Caddy on the crowded streets along Queen Street West, a neighborhood where boutiques offering exclusive couture mingled with cafes, bistros and nightspots of varying degrees of respectability. Now he hesitated only briefly in the face of the faux frou-frou entrance to Naughty Nighties before allowing the good doctor to pull him through the cupid-covered doors.

Towing Knight behind her, Natalie could not see the smug grin that flickered briefly across his face. When he had pumped Grace for insider information on a gift for Nat, she had bumbled on and on about how much Natalie had loved a black lace teddie from Naughty Nighties that the forensics crew had given her for her birthday a couple of years ago.

"This is where Myra Schanke bought those moose pajamas. She says you have to see this place to believe it," Natalie exclaimed enthusiastically.

It was exactly where Knight wanted most to go, too, but he wouldn't allow his companion to guess that.

Enthusiastic holiday shoppers thronged the narrow aisles of the luxury lingerie emporium. Knight averted his eyes from a rack of lace-up corselettes while Natalie gazed wide-eyed at a display of leather. . . somethings. She caught Nick staring at her staring at . . . whatever, and tried to look nonchalant. This was not going to work if Nick followed her around all evening.

A few minutes later, Knight was inspecting a lavishly appliqued hockey jersey in an improbable shade of lavender when he noticed Natalie suppressing a smirk -- although not very successfully -- at his selection. This was not going to work if they stayed together.

"Why don't we meet ba--"

"Let's split up an--"

They laughed nervously, each hoping the other would not detect an ulterior motive, but readily agreed upon a meeting time next to one of the cashiers before casually strolling off in carefully calculated opposite directions.

* * *

Natalie inspected a mannequin wearing an imported brocaded smoking jacket and a rack of silk boxer shorts, fascinated by the lavish diversity but somewhat shocked at the extravagant prices. Still, really good lingerie was *certainly* worth it! And she wanted to find the perfect pajamas for Nick: something that would persuade him to change those damned black ones -- *they* reminded her inexorably of coffin linings. But something in a warmer color, a more cheerful pattern; something . . . humanizing. The moose pajamas were incomparable, of course, but Natalie doubted that Nick could handle quite that much humanization yet. Or ever. Thinking of the moose pajamas made her smile; she could almost *see* Schanke standing there in them.

In fact, she *could* see Schanke standing there. Only, instead of pajamas, he was wearing an overcoat and a heavily veiled brunette who was obviously not Myra Schanke.

Natalie stood on tiptoe and, not for the first time, wished for more inches. Surely she hadn't seen what she thought she had glimpsed through the milling throng of shoppers. Schanke wouldn't . . . From this viewpoint, the willowy female figure had appeared to be leaning very, very close.

Natalie chewed on her lower lip: she just *had* to find out!

* * *

Meanwhile, Knight had wandered past satin camisoles, past displays of lacy bustiers and filmy negligees and through the entire garter belt department without seeing anything that struck him as essentially Natalie. He was beginning to wish that he had just done what he usually did -- persuaded Janette to do his shopping for him -- when he suddenly and shockingly spied a familiar but dreaded profile: LaCroix appeared to be immersed in comparing the relative merits of a pair of high-heeled feathered mules or quilted fuzzy booties, but Knight, with his supernatural prescience, knew that he knew that he had seen him, and knew that he knew that he knew that he had seen him, and probably even that he knew that. . . Jeeze, that *always* gave him a headache.

"What are you doing here?" Knight hissed, shoving the older vampire so hard with both hands that they both staggered awkwardly past quilted bed jackets and into a conveniently located inconspicuous corner.

"Really, Nicholas," complained LaCroix, brushing Knight off him, "your manners deteriorate steadily with your unseemly association with mortals. I am merely doing a little shopping; 'tis the season, and so forth."

LaCroix apparently had no difficulty interpreting the incredulous look that his explanation provoked.

"Pah!" he snorted haughtily. "It was customary to offer '*des petites cadeaux*' to loved ones at the winter solstice centuries before your anemic little religious festival was ever thought of."

"Anemic?"

"Bloodless, Nicholas. A religious event *sans sang*. Nevertheless, it is pleasant to remember old friends . . . and to be remembered," he added, smiling rather coyly.

* * *

Meanwhile, Natalie stalked stealthily down the aisle adjacent to the one in which she had spotted Schanke, squirmed through a rack of tastefully transparent teddies and burst out on the other side right

||

||

in front of the startled detective.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed, grabbing fistfuls of his coat in both hands and darting a look around in search of the mysterious female.

"What?! Shopping! What's it look like? Jeeze, Nat," Schanke complained, peeling her off his chest, "can't a man buy a present for his wife without the whole world getting their knickers in a knot?"

"For Myra, huh? Yeah, I bet! Who was that woman I saw you with?"

"What woman? Oh! Man-oh-man, Nat, give me a break! She's just a frie-- uh, really just an acquaintance. She's a really snappy dresser and I asked her for some suggestions about what to buy Myra for Christmas 'cause I want to get her something classy. But she couldn't describe. . . or, er, I didn't understand. . . anyway, she finally said she'd just meet me here to help me pick out something really elegant. And, jeeze, am I glad she did!" he continued, rolling his eyes at their surroundings. "I've never seen so much. . . so much stuff I don't even know the names of!"

"Oh, yeah? Why didn't you ask *me* to help you out?"

"Like when? You're busy all the time and when you're not working you're almost as incommunicado as Knight. Besides, Nat, no offense, but your, uh, wardrobe doesn't exactly make me want to sit up and bark."

"Oh?" she said coldly, momentarily diverted from her mission.

* * *

LaCroix was absently sorting through a stack of diaphanous nightgowns while Knight alternately cajoled and pleaded with him in an attempt to persuade the older unbeing to leave before Natalie came looking for him.

"I'll meet you later and let you berate me without whining about it! Or we can go a few rounds in a warehouse of your choice. Whatever you want from me, tell me, but leave here now, please!"

"You flatter yourself, Nicholas," LaCroix drawled, raising one eyebrow quizzically, "I did not track you . . . and your . . . friend here tonight. This shop was recommended to me for some very special purchases. Finding that little something for that special someone is so important."

"Oh, yeah! I'm *sure* you have a Christm-- uh, a solstice, or whatever, list a yard long!" Knight's voice was beginning to slide perilously close to the high peaks of hysteria. "And you plan to fill it entirely with select lingerie!"

"Why not? You appear to underestimate sadly the importance of '*les sous-vetements*.' Another area in which I find your education incomplete, Nicholas . . ."

Light and vision rippled as LaCroix dragged Knight into his flashback . . .

Thin winter light trickled into a vaulted compartment typical of a medieval castle or keep, richly furnished and heavily draped against the frigid air, although to little avail. LaCroix, in his historical flashback persona, appeared to be the only person in the room not slowly freezing to death. He was silently observing what appeared to be a royal audience surrounding a youthful but kingly looking man seated on a low chair on a curtained dais at one end of the chamber. Although dressed in woolens and furs, all the mortals present had the pinched and bluish look of those suffering from icy feet, stiff fingers, runny noses and chilblains. Those not immediately under the royal eye also showed a tendency to scratch themselves surreptitiously. Wool next to the skin is a whole category of hell in itself.

The murmur of conversation ceased suddenly as a page ushered a new petitioner into the royal presence. The newcomer was distinguished by an air of comfy warmth sadly lacking in others present, seemingly both toasty and comfortable in his handsome woolen robe. He was a dark haired and smookey-eyed man in his thirties, strongly built and noble of bearing. Knight puzzled over his features for a moment, reminded of . . . someone . . .

"Nicholas!" whispered LaCroix, tugging at his sleeve, "Close your mouth. Really, I can't take you anywhere anymore."

"But-- Don't you--?" Knight rolled his eyes towards the stranger: the man was the exact image of . . .

"Good Master Schancitus,"¹ the king greeted him as he approached the throne, "We are pleased to welcome you to Our royal audience chamber. Have you made good progress towards solving this predicament that plagues your King and Our Royal Court so sorely?"

"Sire," began Master Schancitus, bowing respectfully, "I believe that I have secured

¹ Dialogue translated from the proto-French for the convenience of the modern, er, future, or whatever, reader

a solution for Your Highness. Behold!" he exclaimed, as he whipped out a folded garment and unfurled it before the king, "*des sous tout* -- that which shall be worn under all else! If assumed under all other apparel, next to the skin, this garment will prevent warmth from escaping and, simultaneously, protect the tender bits from chaffing and chapping."

Gasps of amazement and murmurs of excitement swept through the crowd as the king examined the soft and thick, yet pliable and warm fabric of the close fitting garment proffered to him.

"Schancitus, my good friend, this advances you in Our esteem even beyond the measure of that procured by your invention of bechamel sauce. It will enable Us to plan a winter campaign instead of skulking at home under Our royal bedcovers six months out of the year. Our royal thanks to you; you shall be knighted for this service."

Light began to ripple and dim as the flashback slipped back into real time, but not before Knight had glimpsed the heraldic escutcheon worked in royal purple thread on the newly invented long johns.

* * *

"Charlemagne?" Knight asked, already knowing the answer, and then, his voice sliding into the higher register that signals the departure of rational thought, "Schancitus?!"

"Just 'Charles' back then, I fancy," replied LaCroix, "but after the timely invention of thermal undergarments by the Chevalier Schancitus, history will in time add 'the Great' to his reign. Those who truly understand the importance of lingerie will be able to manipulate the social, political and economic future of the world in the next few centuries. I have someone doing research in the area even now. I look forward to a very great increase in both my fortune and my influence someday from a perfect understanding of the vagaries of vests and knickers."

Knight stared at him in dawning horror and amazement. "You are mad, LaCroix. Truly mad," he gasped.

"How long I have hoped," sighed LaCroix, dropping his eyes dolefully, "but how little you understand, even now, after all I have done for--"

"What you are doing is driving me mad, too! Will you *please* leave now?"

"Actually, Nicholas," drawled LaCroix, whipping out a scribbled list about a yard long, "if you truly desire so much to see me off the premises, you *could* do one little thing for me that would speed my departure . . ."

* * *

Natalie frowned as she examined the beaded satin tap pants that Schanke held up for her.

"I don't know, Schanke," she said doubtfully, "could she sit down in those?"

"Sit down? I thought they were for dancing. Why do they call them 'tap pants'?"

"Uh, I think that's just because of the style. But you can't dance *all* the time."

"Well, you may be right. But J-- uh, my. . . hm, hm," he mumbled the last word, "says she has a dozen pairs and they're *tres chic*."

Natalie, like you dear reader, was startled but not exactly surprised by now at the sudden cold breath on the back of her neck and the lightly accented voice that murmured in her ear.

"Zut! So now I must be an 'hmhm' to such as this! No, I think *not*!"

Janette, brandishing an armful of sheer frillies, stalked around Natalie to glare at Schanke. "I have put myself to a *great* deal of trouble for you, Detective, and I am *not* an 'hmhm' to anyone!"

"No, no!" Schanke stuttered, waving the scintillating panties in the air like a matador, "I just, er, I mean, uh. . ." He paled slightly as he visibly considered which lady he could most -- or least -- afford to offend.

The two women exchanged a knowing glance: although hardly natural -- or unnatural -- allies, they instinctively conspired to keep the helpless male off-balance between them as they moved in for the kill.

* * *

"Alright," huffed Knight, "this is all." He draped an armful of underpinnies and sleepwear in layers over the rack of flannel nightshirts that LaCroix was industriously sorting through so that he could consult his half of LaCroix's shopping list.

"This negligee for. . ." -- a pale finger ticked off each name so that LaCroix could see it -- "And the leather, uh. . . 'hmhm' for. . . Then this, er, boudoir wrapper. Oh, I couldn't decide on this one," Knight continued, holding up two different pairs of figured silk pajamas, "which ones. . . ?"

"Oh," LaCroix paused only a second before nodding his approval, "the frog pajamas. Definitely."

"Good. Then we're finished -- I mean, *you're* finished! Unless--" Knight indicated the plaid flannel nightshirt that LaCroix was holding and started to check the list for a name he might have missed, "who's that for?"

"No one, really. I just like it," LaCroix responded, draping it across his chest. "What do you think?"

"Well--" Knight examined the fuzzy tartan garment more closely, "Yeah! I can see it. It's really *you*. You should buy it."

"I rather thought so myself. But, Nicholas, what's this?" LaCroix said, suddenly plucking a silky kimono

out from under the stack of accumulated lingerie. "I don't recall . . .?"

"That's . . . mine."

"Oh?" LaCroix spread the softly shining garment out, flourishing the trailing sleeves. It was a fabulous example of Japanese quilting in the inimitable brocaded silks of that fabled country. The rich jewel tones glittered with lavish gold and silver thread and the fabric flowed heavily and sensuously over his arm. Knight would have held his breath if he had had any, but LaCroix merely smiled and handed it back to him.

"Very handsome, Nicholas. Perhaps you are not as hopelessly insensitive to intimate apparel as I thought."

"Thank you."

"You are entirely welcome. Well, I suppose that you are anxious for me to settle this commercial transaction and depart, *n'est pas?*"

* * *

Janette was obviously determined to live up to her reputation as a snappy dresser while Natalie was equally resolved to prove that her taste in lingerie could, when *she* so chose, make a man -- or whatever -- sit up and bark.

Schanke had been forcefully enthroned on one of the chairs intended for flagging shoppers or bored spouses to audition the selections of fashionable "dishabille" that flashed before him as Janette and Natalie displayed the loot of lightning fast forays into the adjoining departments and far-reaching aisles of Naughty Nighties.

No sooner had they unanimously voted down the beaded tap pants than Janette proffered her armful of black lace catsuits. Natalie countered with a nightgown constructed mostly of artfully draped ribbons. When Janette declared it too matronly, Natalie darted off in search of something more outre while Janette proposed a red satin chemise that tied up at the shoulders with perky little bows.

Schanke groaned and covered his eyes when Natalie retrieved a two-piece peek-a-boo set but cheated through his fingers as Janette draped a spangled sari around herself and posed poutingly.

It was just like 'dueling banjos' in "Deliverance." Schanke fervently hoped that he would not end up being Ned Beatty.

Finally, just as Schanke was beginning to feel dizzy from the glimmering cavalcade, Natalie happened to catch sight of her watch as she was flicking a trailing sleeve over her wrist.

"Oh, my. Oh, Schank, I'm late," she gasped in horror, "Sorry -- I . . . uh, good luck! Gotta run -- Later --" she stuttered as she backed away a few paces before turning to run.

"Tant pis, chérie!" Janette called out after her retreating figure, "too bad, but we will *try* to get along without you." Then, smiling ferally, she turned back to the lingerie-shocked Schanke. "Bien! Now I show you this-- "

"Wow!" Schanke's eyes popped open and he sat up straight. "Now that's more like it. Uh, you don't think it's a little too. . . uh, too . . .?"

"*Mon cher,*" smirked Janette, "you have been married to the same woman for how long? You both need a little 'too, too.'"

They both gazed with satisfaction at the gossamer fine peignoir that she had unfurled. It was incredible that anything containing that much yardage could conceal so little, but the material was little more than a silver cobweb across her white hands.

"Yeah . . ." Schanke sighed, "that's it."

* * *

Natalie chewed on her lip *and* jumped up and down in place. Nick wasn't at their appointed meeting place and she was nearly half an hour late; where would he have gone? Looking for her? Should she stay put or search for him? In her present state of nerves, better to keep moving; he had to be in the store someplace . . .

* * *

Knight, waiting at the gift wrapping counter, smiled at Natalie's worried face and disheveled air as she came flying up to him, holding her hat on with one hand and gasping for breath.

"I'm so sorry-- "

"I know I'm a little-- "

"I just lost track-- "

"--late, but we still have-- "

"You're late? Oh, good; I thought *I* was late."

"No, no! I just finished," he grinned, holding up a largish silver and gold parcel. "Where's yours?"

"Oh!" She looked rather guilty. "I guess I spent too much time just looking, and then you'll never guess who-- "

"Knight! Nat didn't mention that you were here, too!" Schanke looked pleased to see another out-of-familiar-waters male.

Knight turned at the sound of his partner's voice but froze suddenly at the sight of his elegant companion.

"Actually, she didn't mention *you* were here either, Schank," he replied, smiling gamely but with a certain amount of shock apparent in the glazed look he fixed on Janette.

"Yeah, well we've all been pretty busy finishing up--" Schanke waved a silver and gold wrapped package identical to the one under Knight's arm. "It was expensive, but it will be worth it."

"Yeah, great place for--" Knight indicated his own similar box.

"Hey, we were thinking about going for a latte," Schanke smiled, "Your guys wanna come?"

"A what?" squeaked Knight, darting an incredulous look at Janette, who smiled composedly at him as she slipped her hand through her escort's elbow, causing Natalie to start giggling at the identical astonished expressions on both men's faces.

"You know--"

"Uh, yes, I know-- I mean, uh, *where*?"

"Jeeze, Nick, I thought you were the expert on nightlife around here. There must be a dozen all night cappuccino bars in this neighborhood. You won't even have to move your car."

A cold draft -- almost a wind -- seemed to blow up all of a sudden, ruffling Janette's veiling, flipping Natalie's broad-brimmed hat, twirling Schanke's long muffler and generally raising havoc amongst the party of four. Natalie grabbed for her hat, knocked against Knight who turned to catch her as she almost fell off-balance and dropped his package. Janette grappled with the ends of Schanke's scarf, which had wrapped its trailing ends around her neck, while Schanke tried to assist her but managed only to get his fingers caught in her veiling and drop his package, too. A salesclerk dived daringly for the foil wrapped presents, retrieving them before they could come to grief under incautious feet.

Suddenly everything struck them as funny: Knight carefully placed Natalie's hat back on her head -- backwards. She collapsed against him, giggling helplessly at Schanke and Janette as they executed an inadvertent but quite advanced dance step attempting to untango -- uh, I mean untangle -- their respective garments. Schanke manfully refrained from laughing as Janette spat the fringes of his scarf out of her mouth. Even she greeted the general mayhem with a mere moue of her perfect lips.

After they had sorted themselves out and stopped giggling over it, the saleswoman presented the correct silver box -- or was it? -- to each gentleman with a little bow and a polite smile that managed to suggest that such childish antics ought best to be taken outdoors. Janette gave a gallic sort of shrug and removed herself from the center of the turmoil with the air of a person who was not really acquainted with these other persons.

Although the collective demeanor of the remaining trio only became more raucous, they took the hint and staggered off in the direction of the front doors, Natalie sandwiched cozily between the two men. Only the exquisite damsel lingered.

Janette turned slowly in a half circle, eyes staring but blank, as though searching the premises with some other sense. But if she saw -- or sensed -- any untoward presence or influence, she disclaimed responsibility for it as she shook her head and shrugged. She could see the others disappearing in the crowded aisle, twin silver and gold parcels in evidence under two different masculine arms.

"That will be trouble," she muttered as she hurried to catch up.

* * *

What a strange thing to say, the salesclerk thought, shaking her head. But there might be dark secrets -- probably like the ones discussed on daytime talk shows -- between the most cheerful seeming couples.

Or, in this case, two couples, which geometrically increased the scandalous possibilities. Before her imagination could suggest the reprehensible if imaginary details, she noticed a customer bearing down on her with the look of one about to demand assistance. She pasted on a professional half-smile for the dark, petite woman with Eurasian features approaching the sales counter.

"Madame, are you being helped?"

"I would like," the new customer began in a tone accustomed to command, her steely gaze pinning the saleswoman like a suspect about to be grilled, "some pajamas. Moose pajamas. I understand that you stock them here."

The End

*And a Raucous Holiday to All from
Pam & Sherry*

Sidney vs. Treezilla

by Susan M. Garrett

(Okay, so it's a Christmas Story)

His green-gold eyes blinked once, then again, and he rubbed his muzzle against the pine needles that surrounded him. His non-fur hadn't filed down his claws recently, so his grip on the bark of the tree was strong and true. Another short leap and a scramble and he'd almost be at the summit.

Sidney's ears shifted when he heard the snap of the lock on the door -- a key being turned. His nose twitched involuntarily when rubbed by the bristles of the pine needles as he turned his head, hearing the sound of his non-fur's voice.

Natalie was home. And his claws were too firmly imbedded to make a quick leap and escape undetected. Maybe if he just stayed where he was, nestled among the shiny-bright things and the warm-blinky things, she wouldn't notice--

"Sidney!"

Hairballs!

"Sidney, you bad, bad boy!" Her fingers grasped his midsection and he yowled unhappily as she unintentionally tickled him. "No apologies!" scolded Natalie.

He spun in the air for a moment as she turned him to face her, his legs dangling freely, his tail twitching in acute embarrassment. He *hated* that! It left him vulnerable for attack and the scent on the air told him that her fanged near-mate was also here.

Natalie shook him slightly, her eyes fixed on his. "Bad boy!" she scolded again. "How many times have I told you, no climbing on the Christmas tree!"

"He's a cat, Nat," said Nick. "Cat's climb. It's only natural."

Sidney twisted in her hands, his rear paws kicking futilely as he heard the sound of the fanged-one's voice.

"*Not* a tree with lights and ornaments. Or are you gonna tell me they grow overnight, fully decorated, just add tinsel?" Sidney recognized the cue -- he meowed pitifully and hung his head.

"All right," relented Natalie, her eyes narrowing only briefly in suspicion. "But no more tree climbing?"

Another pitiful meow and she crouched down, putting him on the floor. Sidney dashed for the safety of the underside of the dining room table, his tail flicking lightly against Nick's shoes as he passed. The chair legs provided a maze of wood -- thank heavens he was old enough to resist the temptation of that scratching urge any longer! -- and he slipped in and out of the openings before he stretched out on the rug and looked upward, watching his non-fur and that fanged-one.

His non-fur was shedding her outer covering, which the fanged-one took from her. "Thanks," she said, taking a step toward the tree, then rearranging the things he'd dislodged in his climb.

"You've done a beautiful job on that tree," said Nick, tossing her covering on a chair, then joining her.

Sidney hissed softly as the fanged-one moved closer to his non-fur. He smelled danger and blood on that one, as well as great age, and he tried again and again to warn his non-fur Natalie to run away. He'd even tried to chase off this fanged-one that pretended to be a non-fur.

But she didn't take the hint. And the fanged-one was too big and strong to frighten away, so he and Sidney had settled into a truce of sorts.

That fanged-one -- Nick -- made his non-fur's lips curl. Her voice purred often when she spoke with him or about him. And even when she showed her teeth, her claws were sheathed. Sidney knew a near-mate pairing when he saw one and though it saddened him that *his* non-fur had found another fanged male to keep her company, and a dangerous one at that, his tail swished in joy for her.

His eyes narrowed into slits and he tilted his head, hearing his name -- but she wasn't calling him.

"-- Keep Sidney off it," Natalie complained, still fixing the shiny stuff he'd knocked out of place. "There's pepper on the bark --"

"I noticed that," answered Nick, taking a step back and sniffing slightly.

Sidney rubbed his own nose against his paw, agreeing. Nasty stuff -- made him sneeze.

"Lemon on the needles. I even bought a bottle of that 'Cat-be-gone' stuff."

"And?" asked Nick sympathetically.

"My cat is a mutant -- he loves it." She turned and searched the room, as if looking for him. "I had to dump it, he went bananas, like it was catnip or something!"

Sidney grinned, showing the tips of his fangs. He wasn't a lap cat, after all -- he knew enough to pretend that foul nasty-bad stuff she'd placed around the tree was pure cream. Silly non-fur! He could fool her so easily . . .

Which was why he was still a little alarmed about the fanged near-mate. Might *Nick* be able to fool non-fur Natalie as well?

The thought made him scramble out of his hiding place. Natalie spotted him and scooped him into her arms. "There you are, you bad boy."

Even though she scolded him, her voice was soft and cooing. Sidney nuzzled her cheek, stretched along the length of her neck and shoulder, then settled in her arms, his eyes fixed on that fanged-one, unblinking.

"I'm just afraid that he'll get hurt," said Natalie, stroking his fur. "He could get tangled in the garland and fall. Never mind chewing on the ornaments, choking on small bits . . ." She turned and Sidney found himself with a non-fur-eye-view of the tree and all of the pretty-pretty sparkles. "I unplug the lights before I leave, but this time I forgot -- so what happens if he pulls the plug from the wall and starts a fire or

something? I'm getting desperate enough to try chicken wire."

Sidney heard the fanged-one move closer and tensed in Natalie's arms. The cold fingers stroked the fur on his head and his eyes narrowed into slits as he hissed very, very softly.

His non-fur missed it, but the fanged-one drew back quickly, frowning. "I can see the problem. Would you . . . would you like me to try something?"

"You mean, like male bonding or something? Because believe you me, I am *not* that permissive. Sidney's not a discipline problem -- well, not much --"

The fanged-one turned away, smiling. "No. I was thinking of something more like a . . . suggestion."

"Suggestion." Sidney felt his non-fur's arms tighten around him and meowed his protest, craning his head to keep the fanged-one in view, sensing her unease. "Like . . . that hoodoo stuff? Are you talking about hypnotizing Sidney?"

The fanged-one was looking at the tree. He shrugged. "Well, he seems to understand you. It just might work."

"I . . . don't think so," said the non-fur, hugging Sidney to her.

"It was only a suggestion." Nick shrugged again, his smile fading as he added, "I didn't get a chance to ask -- about the Teichman case?"

Sidney pushed his back legs against his non-fur's body and she released him. With extraordinary grace -- well, at least *he* thought so -- he sailed through the air and landed lightly, then made his way into the kitchen, in search of his food bowl.

He recognized the tone of the conversation, the drone of the words, as being anything but dangerous. There were more important things to do, like check his dish -- nope, nothing there yet -- then patrol the apartment in search of intruders. His non-fur was safe enough in the presence of the fanged-one.

For now.

* * *

She'd gone to the place of dead things.

Sidney had long since grown to recognize the signs and smells; the coverings worn by his non-fur always changed with her destination, which he knew from the smells she brought back with her. When he'd been small, the smell of the dead things had made him uneasy, but he'd grown to accept it as a part of her.

He patrolled the territory again, tail twitching and held aloft, signaling intruders that he was on alert and ready for action.

But there *were* no intruders. And Sidney haughtily strutted to the couch and leapt onto it, knowing that none would be so foolish as to risk his claws and fangs. He settled onto the cushion, careful to sheathe his claws as he kneaded the spot he choose. Closing his eyes, he settled into sleepy, feline darkness.

It was the cold that awakened him -- a drift of fresh air that carried the crisp scent of *outside*.

Sidney opened his eyes, blinking slowly, and raised his head from the comfort of his paws. He hissed, showing fangs at the other scent that reached him -- the smell of a fanged-one and soft leather.

The dark shadow by the brightly lit tree turned toward him and he saw the features of the thing -- another like that Nick his non-fur purred at. Its eyes were light and bright as it caught sight of him. "A pet? I didn't expect to find you, here."

The fur on Sidney's back bristled as he arched it, his tail rising straight and true as he hissed a warning that he was about to strike.

"None of that," said the fanged-one, his voice soft but carrying a threat Sidney understood. It reached for him.

Sidney darted from the edge of the couch, but the fanged-one was too fast, like all of his kind. He caught Sidney evenly, one hand grabbing the loose fur at his scruff and pinning his head, the other arm cradling him. "I wonder how well you do with Nicholas around, hmnn?" The fingers scratched his head softly but firmly. "Don't appreciate the competition for your lady's attention?"

The voice was soft and sure and smooth. Sidney felt his fear and anger drain away, his eyes slitting and his muscles warming to the stroking of his fur. He almost purred . . .

Then he shook his head beneath the fanged-one's hand, trying to regain his wits. What was he thinking! This was a bad one, he could smell it. He had to get away, to warn his non-fur.

But he was held too tightly to squirm from the grip of the fanged-one. So he settled, muscles tensed, and waited for the proper moment to make a bid for freedom.

The fanged-one continued to stroke his head. "I think I may have done you a favor," he said, turning toward the pretty-pretty tree, with the glittering lights. He reached out a hand and plucked an envelope he'd left on the tree. "I've left your mummee -- is that what she has you call her? She seems the type -- I left your mummee a little gift."

It was a bright envelope, like the pretties on the tree. There was a dark slash across it. The fanged-one held it up, as if examining it. "A fair job on Nicholas' handwriting, but I was in a bit of a hurry. She only needs to open it, to read so far, before accuracy won't be that essential. This," he shook the envelope in front of Sidney's nose, "is a 'confession' of sorts, of all the things Nicholas has done through the centuries . . . with a few embellishments, of course."

Sidney yowled softly and narrowed his eyes -- his haunches were still held tightly.

"You may well meow," said the fanged-one pleasantly, replacing the card. "It won't free you of Nicholas . . . not at first. But it *will* drive a wedge between them. And any fissure can be widened, with the application of the proper pressure in the proper place." He stroked Sidney's head, then peered into the cat's eyes. "So, you'll have your mummee back. And I'll have Nicholas."

The fanged-one released him suddenly and Sidney was hard-pressed to keep his balance, but he landed on all fours, if not gracefully. Shooting beneath the dining table, he sought a secure position and whirled, ready for attack.

But the fanged-one had gone, closing the window behind him, leaving only the scent of age and leather and the barest hint of that intoxicating air from . . . outside.

For a moment, Sidney's eyes misted over as he thought about that wonderful, wide place beyond his territory. His non-fur had taken him beyond on the days of warmth and bird song, or even during the days of decay and leaf-fire smells. Sometimes it was just to play. Sometimes it was to go to the bad place, with the white, bright, shiny-cold things and all those furred non-cats with loud barks and big teeth. But it was *still* outside. How he longed to explore it . . .

Sidney shook his head again, then rolled on his back, trying to shake off the scent of the fanged-one's hand from his fur. As he rolled and scratched, he caught sight of that thing, high up in the tree--

And stopped. The fanged-one had left the thing. The fanged-one was bad. So it must be a bad thing.

Sidney growled in the back of his throat, his chest rumbling as he thought about what the fanged-one had said. That would make the Nick fanged-one go away. How could it be a bad thing?

But his non-fur Natalie would be sad if the fanged-one Nick went away. She wouldn't purr anymore. It was like that when a near-mate left. So it *must* be a bad thing.

It *was* a bad thing, since it had come from that fanged-one. Sniffing anxiously, Sidney rolled one or twice more on the carpet in an attempt to rid himself of that old fanged-one's scent, then he stretched out on the carpet and looked up at the tree.

The bad thing was high. Very high. Up near the shiny things that Sidney wanted to reach and play with.

He could climb, of course. He was a good climber -- the best. But his non-fur would be angry, she told him not to climb the tree. And she would be home soon.

But when she got home, she would find the bad thing. And she would be sad.

So, Sidney decided to climb the tree and get the bad thing *before* she got home. Then his non-fur wouldn't be sad and she would purr again.

The monumental decision took a few minutes, but Sidney worked on cat-time (which is based on the equation $\text{forever} = \text{now}$) so it didn't matter to him. He paced back and forth in front of the tree, tail twitching, eyes narrowed, as he tried to find the proper angle of attack. There -- just a space with nothing attached, lots of branch to grab . . .

A leap was better than grabbing the trunk and running up -- which meant strenuous climbing. A launch from one of the chairs, or even the table, would work.

So Sidney went back to the underside of the table. If he dug his claws into one of the chair legs (his non-fur wouldn't see it right away), and pulled up, he could reach the cushion of the chair. From there it was an easy jump to the table . . . although he knocked over some candles with a satisfied twitch of his tail.

He was distracted only for a moment, but after having decided that the candles had no real taste, he abandoned them and centered his attention on the tree again.

It sparkled and blinked at him. Sidney blinked back. Then he turned and walked down the length of the table, his steps measured and easy, pacing his way into position.

The table covering slid as he walked and Sidney took that into account as he plotted his trajectory. It was something cats knew instinctively, as they leaped from here to there. He also knew that this leap would be special. So he took care in finding the right place to set his paws. There was only a moment of hesitation, as he wiped his nose with the pad of his paw, then licked the underside of one claw, which seemed dry and stiff.

It was a spectacular launch! Sidney barely noticed the cloth on the table traveling with him, sliding to the floor and accompanied by the clatter of the candles and flowers his non-fur had left there. There was the table, then the air, then --

The green tree, pine needles poised like pins and smothered in the scent of dead Christmas, hurtling toward him. He struck, yowled, but remembered to dig his claws into the trunk and limbs . . . anywhere he could find purchase. One set of claws hit true and snagged wood. The other three sets scrambled, knocking away shiny things, which crashed to the floor below, or got tangled in the blinky-pretties.

The tree swayed beneath him, one side to the other, but Sidney continued to scramble, trying to gain purchase. One claw dislodged the bad thing the fanged-one had left and it wedged between his belly fur and the pine needles (for which he could have purred in gratitude -- those pine needles were *sharp*).

There was the feeling of flight, of laughing himself in a leap . . . but he was attached to the tree. It was the *tree* that was leaping, toward the floor. Unable to disentangle himself, Sidney scurried within the branches and rode with it, letting out an outraged cry. This was *not* a good thing.

The sounds were deafening, especially since he was in the center of it all -- the crash of glass, the thump of the tree. But the blinkies still shone around him. Dazed, Sidney simply sat within the branches, surrendering to the silence.

Then he heard the keys in the door.

He tried to leap free, but the blinky-thingies trapped him. When he nipped at the wire, it nipped back and he howled in protest . . . but the wire wouldn't let him go. His non-fur was coming! If he could only get out, hide under the bed, she'd never know he'd caused this. He'd been asleep the whole time, hadn't heard a thing --

It was too late. The door opened and he heard her voice as she entered, "-- don't know *what* you and Schanke were thinking. A butterfly knife couldn't have caused -- oh my God!!! Sidney?!"

He huddled down amongst the branches at her tone, startled and not knowing whether he was being scolded or called. That fanged-one -- Nick -- was with her and they both ran to the fallen tree, kneeling on the floor.

"The plug for the light?" asked Nick.

"There --"

The blinky-blinkies went out. Sidney huddled in the darkness of the tree, his claws scratching against something flat and smooth -- that bad thing. He settled his body over it, not wanting his non-fur to touch

it because it would hurt her. When she reached for him -- "Poor baby, are you all --?" He hissed.

"Nat, let me," said Nick, suddenly beside her. "He's probably just scared --"

"I know he's scared, poor Sidney. Come on out of --"

Her hands were around him, lifting him away. She'd touch the bad thing. He couldn't let that happen. And so, Sidney unsheathed his claws and, using the tiniest one, dug it into the skin of his non-fur.

"Ouch!" cried Natalie, as she released Sidney and pulled back, sitting down on the carpet suddenly. "Damn! He scratched me. He's *never* scratched me."

"Let me see," said Nick.

Sidney burrowed down among the branches and meowed plaintively for forgiveness. He shook his head at the scent of blood, then peered out, watching the fanged-one near his non-fur.

But the fanged-one was helping his non-fur to her feet. "Go wash that off, I'll get him out."

"He's not real thrilled when you're around --"

"I told you, he's just scared. Give me a second, I'll get him out of there."

"But he's *never* scratched me before--" His non-fur stared back at the tree, holding her wounded wrist with her other hand. Shaking her head, she walked away.

Before Sidney could sigh in relief, the cold hands of the fanged-one were on him. He twisted, trying to get away, but the grip was firm -- the scruff of his neck pulled tight so he couldn't scratch. But he managed to kick and the bad thing was pulled with him, from among the branches.

"There, I told her you were all right," said Nick, cradling him in his arms. "You're pretty lucky you have nine lives, because when Nat gets out of that bathroom I think she's going to kill --"

Sidney squirmed as Nick picked up the envelope. Sheathing his claws, he patted the leather jacket frantically and meowed, trying to tell the fanged-one not to touch the bad thing. But the fanged-one placed him on the floor, as if forgetting Sidney was there, and rose to his feet, staring at the envelope, saying, "That looks like my . . ."

Sidney brushed against the fanged-one's legs, meowing softly, warning him about the bad thing. Nick looked out of the room as he tapped it against his hand, then stared down at it again. After a moment, he ripped it open in one move and took out the card and paper inside.

Tail twitching, Sidney watched as the fanged-one scanned the paper. He hissed in answer as he saw the fanged-one's eyes go gold, then backed away toward the tree.

"LaCroix," said Nick, also hissing. Hurriedly, he stuffed the paper inside his jacket, along with the bad thing. He moved toward the window, slid it open easily and looked out into the night.

Sidney sniffed, enamored by the sudden scent of outside. He arched his neck and reveled in it, leaping to place his paws on the wall and to reach the sill. But then the window was shut. And Nick scooped him

up off the floor and tucked him under his arm.

"LaCroix was here," said the fanged-one, as if to himself. "He must have left it on the tree. She would have found it -- if not now, then later . . ."

And just as Sidney gave up the idea of escaping being held for the night and was ready to knead himself a soft spot in the crook of the fanged-one's arm, Nick held him aloft by the middle with two hands, letting his rear paws dangled.

"And you knocked down the tree." The fanged-one stared into Sidney's eyes, then smiled slightly. "No. You couldn't have -- Or did you?"

Sidney meowed softly and blinked, his eyes assuming an innocent expression, as they did when he was accused of anything. His non-fur usually relented or scolded him.

The fanged-one did neither, watching him carefully, his smile tightening. Tucking Sidney under his arm again, he leaned down and righted the tree with one hand, setting the base in place.

Sidney jumped as he heard the voice of his non-fur and burrowed his head beneath a crease in the fanged-one's leather jacket.

"Bloody, but unbowed," announced his non-fur Natalie, who held up her wrist and exhibited two flesh-sticky things on her arm (she let him play with a box of them once -- nasty things bit fur and wouldn't let go). Then she moved closer. "Is he all right?"

"Sidney's fine," said the fanged-one, carefully unhooking the claws from his jacket and handing Sidney over. "His paw was caught in one of the light strings, I had to untangle it. It probably pinched him; that's why he scratched you."

"Let me see." Sidney suffered being turned on his back in her arms, as his non-fur bent his paws this way and that. "They all seem fine. Which one was it?"

"I don't know." When she looked up, he shrugged. "Nat, a cat paw is a cat paw." But then he walked over to the tree and the shattered shiny things on the floor. "I think most of this is a loss."

His non-fur rubbed his tummy as she walked over to the tree. "Thank God I took off the antiques. I'll have to get new ornaments tomorrow--"

"Why not tonight?" asked the fanged-one.

Sidney opened one eye, suddenly aware that the bliss of the tummy-rub was gone. But his non-fur ignored his meow of protest. "The stores'll be closed."

"They're all open late for the season. Besides, I need your help to pick out some ornaments for my tree."

"*Your* tree?" When Sidney meowed, she batted his paws lightly, but her eyes were still fixed on the fanged-one Nick.

"Yeah. I'll need something to keep Sidney busy when you drop him off at my place before you head in for work -- at least until the end of the season." Lifting a hand toward the tree, the fanged-one removed the remains of a smashed sparkly-thing. "If we take Sidney, we can cat-test the stuff first."

Sidney gave a slight 'oof' as Natalie picked him up and slung him over her left shoulder, then began stroking his back. "Let me get this straight -- you're offering to cat-sit? Voluntarily?"

"It's obvious you can't leave him here, alone, with the tree. And I don't mind. So, how about it?"

His non-fur purred low in her throat; Sidney batted her neck at the sound. "I have to get changed --"

"I'll clean up out here. I'm sure Sidney will give me a hand. Or a paw."

"Well . . . all right." There was a suspicious note in her voice, but his non-fur Natalie placed him down on the floor, beside the fanged-one. "You boys keep out of trouble."

Sidney almost followed her, but a shaking shiny thing on the floor caught his eye. He walked over to it and batted it with his paw and it shook again.

But then those cold fanged-one hands caught him and lifted him up. Fingers stroked beneath his chin and Sidney leaned into the petting, humming softly, his eyes mere slits.

"I think," said the fanged-one quietly, "I owe you one."

Sidney agreed, nuzzling the hand that petted him, encouraging it to move a little to the left, just beside the ear -- aaaaaah!

"And I think between us, we can keep Natalie safe, right?"

Again, Sidney hummed and purred his assent. He wasn't certain why he'd ever been worried about this fanged-one, who knew exactly where and how to scratch.

"A little shopping might get you out of the doghouse. No catnip, but maybe some squeaky mice, Nat'll probably want bows on them or something . . ."

Sidney wasn't really paying too much attention -- he relaxed under the petting and stroking and stretched his neck this way and that . . . until he heard a familiar jingle. Then his eyes shot open.

His non-fur was shrugging into her covering, his leash in her hand. Sidney pushed out of the fanged-one's grip and dropped to the floor easily -- and gracefully -- then padded up to his non-fur.

They were going *out*!

"Are you sure you want to take him with?" asked his non-fur, as Sidney shook his head, testing the pull on the leash she hooked to his collar. "I mean, we're taking *my* car, right? I know you don't want those claws near your Caddie --"

"Like we're going to fit a full size fur tree in *your* trunk?" asked Nick.

Sidney pulled on the leash, anxious to get going, then glared up at them in annoyance.

"You're really serious about this?" He heard his non-fur chuckle, then she headed toward the door, keys jingling in her hand. "And just how big a tree are we talking about?"

"That's up to Sidney. I'm guessing he'll want to test climb a couple, check out the branches--"

Sidney darted into the hall as the door opened, then paused and sniffed the air beyond his territory. Head held high, he moved smoothly between his non-fur and her fanged near-mate and hoped that the sissy Persian sitting in the window would see him as he left. Because he, Sidney, protector of his non-fur Natalie and friend of her fanged-one, Nick, was going *outside*.

To climb *trees*.

The End

Twelfth Night

a sequel to 'Twas a Nightie for Christmas

by Pamela Rush

Forward: A short story that offers in part to answer those questions oft' posed since the posting of " 'Twas a Nightie for Christmas," namely: (1) the question of the motley and sentimental masses: what did Natalie finally give Nick for Christmas?; (2) the query of the refined and tasteful select: what did Myra give Don for Christmas?; and (3) the inquiry of the devious and perverted few: what fanciful lingerie did LaCroix receive? -- which last remains unknown because your FoDly correspondent has no idea although I am certain that he deserved lumps of coal and brickbats, but <sigh>, such are the ways of the world that the evil seldom get what they deserve and the worthy never do, as it is revealed herein, on "Twelfth Night."

* * *

Time: the smallest, darkest hours of the night of January 5/6th, the Twelfth Night of the Festival of Christmas.

Knight knocked softly again and listened; he still heard only a television program playing at very low volume and the regular breathing of someone deeply asleep. But, familiar as he was with the arrangement of the apartment, his preternatural hearing pinpointed the breather in the living room; she had not actually gone to bed yet and perhaps if he waited a little while she would wake up of her own accord. He shifted the florist's box deftly to his left hand to extract the deadbolt key from his jacket pocket. Natalie wouldn't want him to stand about in the hallway attracting undesirable attention at this time of night. He would just go in and stand right inside the door . . . in the foyer . . . in the dark . . . all alone . . . and wait until he heard her stir.

Of course, he didn't. After snicking the lock closed as quietly as possible, Knight cat-footed it into the living room, finally pausing to scoop up Sidney off his shoes.

Natalie was asleep on her sofa, snuggled into a pile of comfy cushions with her tv remote control dangling laxly from one hand and the other tucked under her cheek. The television flickered on an old movie -- no, a black and white tv drama, older than she was. Although Knight knew that he was out of touch with the evolution of human eating habits, the flock of take-out cartons herded together on the coffee table struck him as an odd assortment: surely the labels originated from an uncommon mix of Chinese, German, Italian and Middle Eastern restaurants -- more diversity than he had ever seen even on Schanke's desk at one time. Fortunately, or perhaps considerably, none of the remains were contaminated with garlic, although many vampires found fermented black-bean sauce nearly as devastating.

He stood looking down at her for a moment, silent and motionless as only his kind could be, until Sidney suddenly smacked him on the nose to remind him of his precarious place in the hierarchy of being.

Rubbing the already healing scratch and resisting the impulse to bare his own fangs at the disdainful feline, Knight deposited Sidney with exaggerated care on the coffee table and slid almost as bonelessly as the cat into the armchair set at an angle to the couch. Sidney inspected the remains of the Moo-Shoo Pork with more appreciation than Knight had.

Wrapped up in a wooly afghan over an oversized t-shirt and sweat pants, Natalie looked unnaturally innocent and deceptively docile when she was unconscious. On closer inspection, the t-shirt bore the red

and white on black logo of a popular syndicated fantasy-action tv program; he had to smile at her ingenuous enthusiasm for the most awful, gothic tv drivel. He set the square florist's box carefully on the edge of the coffee table and settled himself to wait with nearly as much patience as cats alone amongst those still breathing have mastered.

* * *

Natalie's subconscious was not particularly surprised to find her dream self in a nebulous grey cloud that muffled sound and obscured her view. The thick air crackled with static electricity and her hair stood out in a curling halo around her head and shoulders. A creaking sound overhead made her glance up in time to see a spectral figure descending out of the vapors -- a fairly substantial spectral figure, as spectral figures go, wearing a dark silk dressing gown with blood-red satin revers that was the epitome of manly good taste yet reminiscent of a Victorian gentleman's opera cloak and made the wearer resemble a particularly cuddly cross between Bela Lugosi and the flying nun.

"Nice robe!"

"Like it? Myra gave it to me for Christmas."

"From Naughty Nighties?"

"Only place she shops! Ever since she read that vampire book I took home after the Emily Weiss case last fall, she's had these kinky dreams about men in black satin capes. How come you're wearing, uh, what-ever- that-is," he grimaced at her choice of leisure attire, "instead of that long, gold thingy that Nick gave you?"

"Oh, I couldn't vege out in front of the tv wearing *that*. It's much too . . . too . . ."

"Yeah, that's what I thought about the 'peignoir' I got Myra at first, but, actually, it's not 'too, too' at all. It's just right," he leered appreciatively. "Myra even wears it with her hip-waders and, you know, she usually doesn't wear anything else at all with her hip-waders. Unless she's actually fishing, of course."

"Uh, Schank, no offense, but I don't think I wanna know."

"Well, don't think I was gonna tell you, either! How'd Nick like his pajamas?"

"He *told* you--? I mean, uh, how'd you . . .?"

"Hey, Nat! We're compadres! Partners. We got no secrets!"

"I wouldn't bet my last donut on that," she murmured, smiling faintly. "What did he say about them?"

"Whadya mean?"

"About the pajamas? And how about the matching sheets?"

"Why don't you ask him--?"

"Well, of course, he'd be polite to me about it! What did he tell you? Is he actually wearing the pajamas? Is he using the sheets?"

"I really wouldn't know, Nat. We're partners, but we're not *that* close."

"Ah, yeah. Well, how did he come to mention them, then?"

"I asked him. You know, when we had that mix-up with the Naughty Nighties packages and we got it straightened out --"

Natalie rolled her eyes as she recalled her first reaction to opening the very suggestive, but very mistaken, package that actually had been Don's gift to Myra. Of course, it could have been worse: it could have been hip-waders.

"-- and I told him that Myra had been shopping there, too, and then I asked him what you gave him for Christmas --"

"And you *assumed* that --"

"-- and he said the mistletoe pajamas."

"-- I was giving him a prese-- What? What mistletoe?"

"Yeah, he was really tickled; he said they had little green leaves and little waxy berries; you know: mistletoe."

"No! It was -- I'm almost sure it wasn't. It was *holly*. Little wreaths of holly."

"Whatever. But I'm almost sure that he said something about sleeping under the mistletoe. Or maybe . . . maybe it was *peeping* under the mistletoe? Something like that."

It was fortunate that forensic pathologists are incapable of blushing.

"Oh, golly," she muttered with unaccustomed profanity.

"Hey, can we get this business done? I'm on overtime here."

"What business?"

"This three wishes business." He waved a large file folder tied up with red ribbons that Natalie now noticed for the first time.

"Wait a minute. What are you doing here anyway and why'd you bring all your paperwork with you?"

"Hey, it's *your* dream; you tell me. I was off the clock, getting ready for some shut-eye, and then, before I know what's happening, ZAP -- And here I am -- the 'Ghost of Christmas Now and Then'."

"Now and then?"

"It used to be 'Past, Present and Future,' but on television it's so hard to tell the difference."

"But you're the 'Ghost of Christmas' . . . whenever?"

"Or you could call me the 'Don ex Machina' if you like. Same diff."

"And you're going to . . .?"

"Give you three choices, or grant you three wishes, or whatever."

"My wishes?"

"It's all in here," he replied, untying the tapes on the folder, "your wish list . . ."

"I don't have a wish list. I'm perfectly happy the way --"

"Sure you do. It comes from your dreams and fantasies, you know, and someone up there," he wriggled expressive eyebrows at the distant, cloudy ceiling, "keeps track, believe me."

"And just what does it say about me in there?" she asked a little defensively.

"Just the usual, really," the Ghost replied, opening the file, which seemed to be comprised of much more paperwork than could possibly fit into the folder, including stacks of questionnaires, reams of computer printouts, colorful pie charts and a bulky Rolodex. He ran his finger down a form that appeared to have a great many crossing-outs and marginal notes appended.

"It rates your preference indicators like . . . let's see -- Incapable of committing; emotionally erratic; carries a big gun . . . And then we cross-index this information to the 'available' file and then . . . we play the game!"

"Game? What gam--?"

The electrical charge in the air seemed to gather itself into one enormous jolt and --

ZAP--ZOT--ZIP--ZIZZLE--ZUTT--ZZZZZZZZZZ

* * *

"You!"

Natalie started at the sudden change of scene, the brilliant lights glaring in her eyes and the accusatory voice booming in her ears.

"What?!" she cried, blinking into the lights.

"Yes, YOU, Natalie Lambert, are today's LUCK-Y con-tes-tant on --"

A major drum roll further threatened her hearing.

-- the DATING GAME!"

"Ack!"

"Just sit right down here and let me introduce our THREE -- count 'em -- THREE el-i-gi-ble bachelors!"

Schanke continued in a magnified and mellifluous voice that would have done credit to a breakfast food ad. Natalie was pushed firmly onto the tall stool provided and immediately skidded off the other side; it was festooned, as was the entire set, with a superabundance of holiday greenery.

"Hey," Natalie tried in vain to stem the flood of inflated oratory while finding a more secure seat amongst the prickly leaves. "Schanke! This is not my idea of --"

"And I am --" he continued, "-- your MC -- Art Linkenblather!"

"No, you're not. You're --"

"Now, Natalie," Art/Schanke rolled on, "behind this screen are three el-i-gi-ble bachelors from your FAVORITE fantasies! And you can ask each one of them three questions before you choose the LUCK-Y gentleman to accompany you on a fan-tas-tic DREAM date to your very own episode where you will be the guest star tonight! Now, come on, Natalie, play the DATING GAME!"

"Oh, brother," she muttered peevishly. And then, a degree less than graciously, "What the hell. Okay . . . uh, Bachelor Number One -- Where would you take me on our first date?"

A gravelly voice emanated from behind the screened-off area:

"For a donut and a cup of joe, Ma'am."

"Bachelor Number Two?"

"Well, Natalie, that kind of depends on who's buying," answered a smoothly insinuating voice.

"And Bachelor Number Three?"

"Natalie, I'd like to fly you to the moon."

"Okay --" she chewed nervously on her lower lip. So far, Bachelor Number Three seemed to have the right idea. "Bachelor Number Three, what kind of -- Er, that is, what do you wear when you, hmm, go to bed?"

"If I were dreaming of you, Natalie, I'd be wearing a big smile."

"Bachelor Number Two?"

"Trojans. With extra --"

"Ah, thank you!" she interrupted quickly. "Uh, Bachelor Number One?"

"Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts."

"Alright, Natalie," interrupted the MC, "this is your host, Link Blinkendale, reminding you that you have only ONE. MORE. q-u-e-s-t-i-o-n."

"Okay. Bachelor Number Two, what qualities do you look for in a woman?"

"Well, Natalie, first I look for a woman with really big --"

"Okay! Thank you!" she blurted quickly. "Er, Bachelor Number One?"

"I'd like to meet a woman who doesn't have a criminal record, Ma'am."

"Uh, very laudable. So, Bachelor Number Three?"

"A woman who wants to frolic through the reaches of the darkest, longest night with me."

"Well, folks, there you have it! I'm your MC, Bart Breathylizer, reminding you to stay tuned for Natalie's B-I-G decision! Okay, Natalie, who is the LUCK-Y fellow tonight?!"

"Uh, Link, er, Bart -- I choose . . . Bachelor Number Three!"

"Great choice, Natalie! And you will begin your DREAM date with him in just a few minutes, but first let's introduce Bachelors One and Two and see WHAT you're MISSING! Bachelor Number One is Sgt. Joe Friday of the LAPD -- Don't be shy, Joe, give Natalie a big hug! And Bachelor Number Two, of course, is Lt. Frank Drebbin of Police Squad! Folks, let's have a big hand for our losers --er, I mean, eligible bachelors!"

Natalie shook hands with a grim-faced Sgt. Friday and managed to duck Lt. Drebbin's attempt to embrace her more enthusiastically.

"Now, Natalie, you'll find your dream date awaiting you . . ." The mellifluous tones faded and 'The Dating Game' set evaporated as Natalie found herself moving down a dimly lit corridor that grew ever darker with a with a feeling that if she could search it to its mysterious end she might manage to chase her destiny into a corner where it couldn't escape for a change.

Sparks glittered in the charged air.

ZZAP--ZOM--ZITZ--ZIZZLE--ZOTT--ZUKRZZZZzzzzz.....

* * *

Natalie hugged herself, rubbing her palms briskly against the opposite forearms, realizing simultaneously that the air was chilly and that her arms, shoulders, back, neck, midriff and assorted other expanses of skin were bared by her costume, which owed something to classical Greek influence but much more to "Hercules Meets the Amazon Moon Babes."

Besides being cold, she was itchy; a wreath of some sort of sticky leaves was askew on her head, scratching one ear and the nape of her neck. She also felt an uncomfortably tight, sticky pull on the soft skin along her ribs.

Glancing down, she opened her arms to check out the skimpy outfit. The amazing garment left little to the imagination except for just how the bodice -- a narrow swath of flimsy fabric that clung to her breasts in apparent defiance of gravity -- could possibly stay in place.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed, discovering that the miracle of couturiere construction was achieved with discreetly applied duct tape. She was trying to discover how to lessen her discomfort without losing her modesty when she heard footsteps approaching and, whirling in their direction, found the mists clearing obligingly in an arc around her so that she soon caught sight of . . . a young man, eternally youthful, at

least in reruns; not overly tall (but, then, she herself was rather petite); a stocky build but with twinkling blue eyes and curling, sandy hair and with hands outstretched to greet her . . .

"Natalie!"

"Huh?"

"Natalie? My dream date --?"

"Uh, no, I think there's been some mistake," she cried, recognition and realization hitting her simultaneously. "I, uh, I know who you are!"

"Of course you do. And you're my guest star --"

"Not in this lifetime, er, I mean, episode," she said nervously and started to back away. But, as is often the case in dreams, no matter how much she tried, she did not appear to be gaining any ground in the direction in which she wished to move.

"You -- You're . . . Captain Kirk!"

"Call me Jim, Natalie," he said with a grin that was equal parts mischief and sweetness and utterly disarming. And *so* familiar.

"Aargh! Stay away from me! I can get double-talked and two-timed at home!"

"But I won you! Fair and --"

"Ghost, get me *outta* here! Hey! BEAM ME UP, SCHANKE!"

ZAP--ZOT--ZIPP-ZITZZLE--ZUTT-ZZZZZZZZZZZ.....

* * *

Knight had been watching her sleep with the same expression with which Sidney had regarded the take-out leftovers. But she was such a fidgety sleeper that it was beginning to make him nervous: why couldn't the woman sleep in a properly rigid and immobile manner with her arms decently folded across her chest? Instead she thrashed about like a drowning man, er, person . . . whatever.

Knight sat up straighter to see whether . . . and kicked something under the coffee table. He bent to retrieve it and pulled out a paperback book with a black cover -- maybe Natalie had gotten hold of the new Emily Weiss already? He turned it right side up and stared at the title: *Love in Vein; Twenty Original Tales of Vampire Erotica* (edited by Poppy Z. Brite). Ooops. Perhaps it would have been better not to snoop, he thought, shoving the book far back under the table with a guilty glance towards the sleeping coroner.

But she slept as soundly as before, which was to say with a good deal of expression but no sign of awaking. Of course, if she had eaten half of what was missing from all these little take-out cartons, no wonder she was restless. Maybe it would be a kindness to awaken her. Knight's gaze slid to the big cat now sprawling along the back of the sofa. Maybe Sidney would *like* to wake her up . . .

Sidney levitated about eight inches straight up and landed facing ninety-degrees around, indignantly searching for the lightning fast fingers that had prodded him in a seriously undignified place. Although his cat-reflexes gave him a better chance than most to visit fitting punishment on his tormentor, Knight had quit the field and retreated to the armchair, assuming a spuriously innocent look. With either a typical feline indifference to who should suffer for a particular sin, so long as *someone* did, or, possibly, an even more cunning plan to take out a Knight with his Queen, Sidney slid neatly off the back of the sofa onto Natalie's stomach and stalked up her body until he could reach her face with an outstretched paw.

* * *

'ZZIP--ZOTZ--ZAP--ZUTT--ZZZZZZZZzzz.....

The sparks fizzling to infinitesimal cinders in the air were less bright than the ones in Natalie's eyes.

"A *Trek-Bimbo*! What, are you nuts?!"

"Hey, Nat, nothing personal! It's *your* fantasies and your list here --"

"Give me that!" she hissed, wresting the folder from the Ghost. "I want to see what is says in there . . ." She pulled the next card off the Rolodex: "Sonny Cro--! Oh, give me a break!"

"Right," agreed Schanke, taking the card from her hand and peremptorily tossing Sonny Crockett over his shoulder.

"Peter Gunn -- Oh, pul-eeze! This is *not* my mother's fantasy!" Another card went sailing. "Kojak, too bald; Columbo, too rumpled; Baretta, too short; Peter Caine? Too young. Jim Rockford, too old; Magnum, too laid-back; Mulder, *too* spooky! Captain Scarlet, too wooden; Walker, too . . . too much. Nick -- Nick -- Nick -- or Chris? No; no; no; no way --" It was snowing Rolodex cards now. "Starsky *and* Hutch? You gotta be kidding?"

"No, uh, only one at a time, of course. Take your pick; I can never remember which is the blond, sensitive one --"

"That's Hutch," she smiled despite herself.

"-- and which is the dark, macho one."

"That's Starsky."

"Jeeze, just like Nick and me, huh?"

"In your dreams! Either one of you! But," she sighed deeply, "no thanks to either one of them. This isn't 'The Dating Game' -- it's 'Double Jeopardy'! If you can't do better than this, I want to wake up right now! Besides, these are fictional people. It's ridiculous. I have a real life with real friends and --"

"Wait, wait a minute," Schanke interrupted, reaching across her arm to rifle the card file, "wait just a m-i-n-u-t-e. How about this one, hey?" he added, pulling a card from the back of the file and waving it in her face.

"No, I don't want to look at any more . . . Oh," she paused indecisively as she read the card he was holding. "R-e-a-l-l-y? Is he *available*? Wow! MacGyver, huh? . . . No, no!" she shook her head and hunched her shoulders irritably. "Don't tempt me; he's not real either." She stuffed the pile of paperwork back into the folder and tied up the ribbons firmly.

"Nat, no one *that* perfect is *real*."

"I know that. I'm not looking for perfection. Just . . . just . . . possibilities. Just *potential* . . ." her words trailed off but her expression revealed much.

"Well, you shoulda said! Here," he cried, snatching the folder from her hands and tossing it whole into the oblivion of the whirling mists, "we don't need no stinkin' list! Listen to your Uncle Don --" he advised, as he commenced to whisper instructions to her. After a few moments, she began to nod her head in agreement.

"Any questions?"

"Just one. How come the guys get warm, fuzzy dissolves to segue to dream sequences and *I* get lightning up my a--?"

ZIPZ--ZAPP--ZOTZ--ZUTT--ZZZZZZzzzzz.....

* * *

Sidney placed a paw over her half-open mouth and patted her imperatively.

Natalie slowly swam into half-wakefulness, snorted the random cat hair or two out of her nose, and automatically skritch'd him under the jaw when he butted his head against her chin.

"Hey, Sid," she murmured drowsily.

"Hey, Nat."

"Gee, Sidney, when did you star--?"

"Natalie."

Suddenly wide awake and intensely aware of a presence in the room that had not been there when she fell asleep, Natalie sat straight up and gasped for the breath to scream, sending Sidney flying for safety. In the same motion, she swung her legs off the sofa and raised a handful of whatever-was-to-hand to hurl at the probably (the way her luck usually ran) stark-raving-mad-serial-burglar-rapist-killer-vandal-litterbug.

Realizing that in another split second she was going to scream like a steam-engine and doubtlessly cause her neighbors on both sides to call the police, Nick lunged at her, clapping a hand across her mouth, and took two pillows and an onion ring in the face. The tv remote went, more or less, up his nose. He went, more or less, in Natalie's lap.

"Heeeeeee," hissed Natalie almost inaudibly through his fingers.

"Uhng-- Yech--" snorted Nick, spitting out an onion ring and trying to dislodge the tv remote from his eye socket without loosening his hold on Natalie or the cushions smashed between them.

"Y-o-o-o-o-w!" howled Sidney in an indignant crescendo from under the sofa.

Natalie's struggles ceased suddenly, but Knight could feel her rigid posture and could see one wildly staring eye and hesitated to loosen his grip.

"Nat, Nat! It's okay! It's me!"

"Ghrterelovmuh!"

"What?"

"Ghrterelovmuh!"

"Look, I'm gonna let go; don't scream -- Don't scream, okay?"

"I said, get the hell *off* me, you big oaf!"

"Okay!" he exclaimed, looking sheepish as he slid to one side and sunk into the sofa beside her. "I was just trying t o--"

"Suffocate me?"

-- reassure you."

"I didn't *need* reassuring 'til you scared the hell out of me!"

"Nervous women. Jeeze!" Knight swore under his breath, rubbing his cheek where the tiny letters FF and REW could still be seen branded in reverse on the pale skin.

"Sneaky vampires. Jeeze!" Natalie muttered into her pillow, clutching it tightly to her chest under crossed arms.

"Crazy two-legs," sneezed Sidney from under the couch, but without the expletive because no feline equivalent to 'jeeze' exists as, firstly, cats generally disdain euphemism and, secondly, they don't have a word to denote a being more powerful or perfect than themselves anyway.

"Could you possibly tell me why you're skulking around my sofa at, uh, 4:30 in the morning."

"I have a surprise for you!" he burbled, smiling beguilingly. He moved with unnatural speed, sweeping over the coffee table to dump the contents of a white box into his hand and raised the surprise over her head with a grin.

Unfortunately, the surprise was both more fragile and less solid than he was expecting; something distinctly odd about the texture between his fingers caused him to raise his gaze from Natalie's expectant face to his hand just in time to see the Italian pastry shell droop between his fingers and fall with a squidgy plop onto the crown of her head.

Although neatly hidden by her riotous curls (which, he noticed, were in even more frivolous disarray than usual), Knight's acute hearing could discern the faint crackle of the delicate pastry shell as it fractured on impact and the subaudible 'shoodge' of the creamy filling oozing out and, presumably, down.

"Uhhmm," commented Natalie calmly, under the circumstances, "that *was* a surprise! Wha--?" One hand cautiously searched through her tangled hair until it encountered the sticky debris. "Is this, er, an ancient holiday custom?" She dragged the largest piece of the ruined pastry out of her hair and turned her hand up to inspect it.

"No -- It's, uh -- I think it's a canolli," he said, recognizing one of Schanke's favorite snacks.

"Oh, gee, Nick, you shouldn't have! I, uh, don't know how to tell you this, but I already *have* a canolli."

"No, you *used* to have a canolli. That's it. Used to be it, I mean. I'm afraid I mistook it --"

"You *mistook* a canolli?! For what?!"

"I meant the *box* -- Look," he said, scrambling amongst the many white cardboard containers on the coffee table, "... see? It's the same size as *this*." He proffered another white box, admittedly very similar to the first one, with a look that perfectly combined sincere penitence and innocent credulity. Natalie rolled a jaundiced eye at the 'combo special' -- she had seen it before. In her opinion, it went over better without an Italian pastry in your hair.

"Open it," he urged.

"Does it, uh, explode or anything?"

"C'mon, Nat," he pleaded, "we've been so busy the last week and now Christmas is almost over. I haven't really gotten 'round to telling you, er, thanking you, you know ... for the pajamas. They're so, so ... human! And Egyptian cotton sheets! They're terrific! I don't know why I never thought of it -- I haven't fallen out of bed all week!"

"Well, sometimes it takes a woman's touch, I guess --"

With what passed with Knight for rare tact, he refrained from blurting out just who had accustomed him to silk pajamas and satin sheets, although it was an effort.

"-- I'm glad you like them, of course -- But, er ... you already gave me a present ... you didn't need to bring me anything else, really!"

"Yeah, but this is a *thank you*. A special thank you at Christmas, so it has to be tonight. See --" he gave up pressing it on her and opened the cardboard lid himself, turning it up for her to see.

"Oh, gee, holly!"

"It's, uh ... mistletoe, Nat. See the little white berries? It's for, you know --" he pulled the woven ring of stiff green leaves and pearly berries out of the box and raised it above his head, grinning flirtatiously.

"Hey, that's a *really* strange coincidence ... " she confided, wide-eyed, "I just had the weirdest dream about mistletoe. Schanke was in it and he was trying --"

"Schanke?"

"Yeah, Schanke. He was trying --"

"Why was Schanke in your dream?" Knight slowly lowered the green sprig, his hand falling to his side.

"Why? Why is anything in a dream?"

"Yeah? Was *I* in this dream?"

"No, but Sgt. Friday and Lt. Drebbin and Cpt. Kirk were all in it and Schanke was trying to --"

"So everyone on the Toronto P.D. *including* Schanke, but *excluding* me, was in this dream with the mistletoe?"

"Yes -- No, I mean, no -- They're not on the Toronto P.D."

"Well wherever Sgt. Sunday and Lt. Nebbish and Cpt. Whosit are from --"

"They're on *television*, Nick!"

Knight glanced involuntarily at the luminous screen across from them but it offered nothing in the way of an explanation for why this tete-a-tete was coming together with all the elan of a romantic evening with The Three Stooges; he turned back to Natalie with a petulant scowl.

"Schanke isn't on television," he stated, grasping the obvious firmly.

"Well, no, but that's beside the point. The point is that Schanke was trying to tell me the secret of --"

"Ouch!" Knight jerked his hand up from his side, waved it furiously in the air a couple of times, then inspected the red scratch running between the thumb and fingers and wrapping around to his palm.

"What is it?"

"That damned -- I mean, Sidney, your . . . cat, just grabbed the mistletoe! Where'd he go?" he asked, sliding off the sofa to peer under it with mounting frustration. He was rewarded with a snake's eye view of the rear end of a cat scampering into the hallway.

"Oh, no! Aren't the berries poisonous? Sidney! Come back here!" Natalie lurched to her feet, tripped over Knight and sat down again suddenly. He rubbed the place where her knee had made contact with his ear as he sat up.

"He's not going to eat it, he just wanted to get even . . . with, uh . . ."

"Y-e-s? Sidney wanted to *get even* with . . . ?"

"Nothing. I'm sure he was just attracted to the fresh greenery. I think it's holly that has poisonous berries."

"I think I'd better go look for him anyway; he likes to chew on things he catches and, at best, he'll just

throw it up again," she commented as she carefully stepped over his legs this time.

"That sounds familiar," Knight groused under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing," he muttered, cranking himself up and suddenly feeling every night of 800 years old. "Look -- It's getting late, or, uh, *early*. Guess I'd better go -- Let you, uh . . . whatever."

"Yeah. I gotta get Sid; he's probably hiding under the bed with his booty. And, uhmm, I guess I'd better wash my hair before . . ."

"Oh, yes. Sorry about that," Knight squinted in embarrassment. "I'll make that up to you. I owe you a canolli. A *dozen* canollis!"

"It's okay, really! I'm not very hungry any more," she shrugged, refusing to look at the coffee table where Knight's fascinated gaze lingered speculatively. "Uh, goodnight, then . . ."

"G'night," he eyed her momentarily as though contemplating a last-ditch, suicide action; but, although there are several good protections against temptation, cowardice is the best one, and he turned slowly towards the foyer and the front door instead. "I'll, er, let myself out, shall I?"

* * *

Natalie regarded the empty room with a mixture of regret and relief. She picked up the tv remote and clicked off the television. After three full seconds of resounding silence, she clicked it back on. She stared at the litter of take-out boxes on the coffee table. Had she really mixed Moo-Shoo, taboulleh, schnitzel, onion rings, and canolli? Served her right to have such freakish nightmares.

She wiped the rest of the ruined canolli off her hands with paper napkins. Good thing she had eaten the other two *before* Nick arrived. And the profiteroles.

On the other hand, if the injudicious mixture of cuisines were responsible for her peculiar dreams, what could possibly account for the bizarrry of her waking life? What in the world -- or out of it -- had she ever done to deserve being slimed with a canolli by a vampire cop in her own living room?

Maybe she'd better clean up and go to bed -- Wait a minute. Familiar theme music drifted softly from the television set. One of her favorites. She sat down on the edge of the sofa just to watch the credits. A couple of minutes later, she reached absentmindedly for an unopened food carton. She'd just watch until the first commercial break . . . or until she ran out of cheesecake . . .

The End(igestion?)

**A More Permanent
Atch-Ee-Double Hockey Sticks
by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons**

There once was a young girl named Divia,
Whose manner could make your skin shivia.
Then, one volcanic night,
She gave daddy a bite,
And now they're both very long-livia.

Why Nick Became a Police Officer and Not an Academic Again

or

Forever Python: The Bruces by Don Bassingthwaite

G'day, Bruce!

Oh, hello Bruce!

How are you Bruce?

A bit crooked, Bruce.

Where's Bruce?

He's not 'ere, Bruce.

Blimey, it's hot in here, Bruce.

Hot enough to simmer a souvlaki!

<pause>

That's a very strange expression, Bruce.

Well Bruce, I heard a detective use it. "It's hot enough to simmer a souvlaki in here, Nat," he said and she smiled quietly to herself.

She's a good Sheila Bruce, and not at all stuck up.

<door opens>

Here! Here's the boss-fellow now!

'Ow are you, Bruce?

G'day Bruce!

Bruce.

Hello Bruce.

Bruce.

Forever Net 4

How are you, Bruce?

G'day Bruce.

Gentleman, I'd like to introduce a man from Froggy-land who is joinin' us this year in the anthropology department at the University of Toronto.

<Everyone> G'day!

Hello.

Nicholas Brabant, Bruce. Nicholas Brabant, Bruce. Nicholas Brabant, Bruce.

Is your name not Bruce?

No, it's Nick.

That's going to cause a little confusion.

Mind if we call you "Bruce" to keep things clear.

Gentlemen, I think we better start the faculty meeting. Before we start, though, I'd like to ask the padre for a prayer.

Oh Lord, we beseech Thee, Amen!!

Amen!

<Nick> Argh!

<pause>

Is something wrong?

Arm cramps. Long flight.

Ah -- I know what would fix that. A beer! Crack two!

<bottles opening>

Now I call upon Bruce to officially welcome Mr. Brabant to the anthropology faculty.

I'd like to welcome the froggy-bastard to God's <Nick, quietly - Argh!> own earth, and remind him that we don't like stuck-up sticky-bates here.

<Everyone> Hear, hear! Well spoken, Bruce!

Bruce here teaches structural anthropology, Bruce there teaches neo-Marxist anthropology, and Bruce here teaches post-modern feminism. And is also in charge of the ice rink.

What's New-Bruce going to teach?

New-Bruce will be teaching archaeology, Mayan Studies, Clarke, Lindross, Borichevsky, Gilmour, and Lemieux.

Those are all hockey players!

Aww, spit!

Howls of derisive laughter, Bruce!

<Everyone> Toronto, Toronto, Toronto, Toronto, we love you, amen!

<Nick> ARGH!

<silence as everyone watches him, then he adds hesitantly:>

Another two?

Right!

<bottles opening>

Any questions?

Yes, are you a vampire?

Are you vampire?

<silence again. Nick says quickly> No!

No. Right, I just want to remind you of the faculty rules:

Rule One! <Everyone> No vampires!

Rule Two, no member of the faculty is to maltreat the grad students in any way at all -- if there's anybody watching.

Rule Three? <Everyone> No vampires!

Rule Four, now this term, I don't want to catch anybody not drinking . . . *<glances at Nick>*
Beer. *<Nick looks sick, but drinks from his bottle>*

Rule Five, <Everyone> no vampires!

Rule Six, there is NO. . . Rule Six.

Rule Seven, <Everyone> no vampires!

Right that concludes the readin' of the rules -- Bruce.

This here's the wattle, the emblem of our land. You can stick it in a bottle, you can hold it in your hand.

Amen!

<Nick> Argh!!

THE VAMPIRE'S SONG

Lestat de Lioncourt was a vampire whore who dressed in silk and sable.
Carmilla, Carmilla was lovely swiller who would bite you whenever able.
Sweeney Todd would get the nod but he's too fond of pie!
And the Lost Boys had evil joys that Van Helsing would despise!

There's nothing Varney couldn't learn 'e on how the blood is bled.
Dracula, himself, enjoyed a glass of red!

Barnabas C., when he'd ceased to be, stalked Collinsport like he'd never leave.
LaCroix, they say, could suck it away, two whole virgins every day!
Bathory, Bathory had a wicked glory, Janette mixed hers with wine.
But poor old Nick had a conscience quick -- "To drink Man's blood's a crime!"

Yes, Dracula himself is particularly dead;
A lesson to immortals - never lose your head!

The End (whew!)

Memories

by Lynne Levine

Tawny Teller smiled as she sat in her apartment watching the 11:00 news. She had done a good job on her latest assignment: the elderly and their pets. Another film clip of hers had aired; another story would be added to her portfolio.

After a commercial break, the news continued. "And now for a follow-up on a story we ran several months ago," Melinda Maple, a perky blond anchorwoman with perfect teeth was saying brightly. "Back in March we reported a curious phenomenon. Numerous psychiatrists around the globe had come forth with the same story: clients claiming to have been vampire victims. Ludicrous? Well, not according to a new organization here in Toronto. They call themselves 'Vampire Victims Anonymous.'"

The scene shifted to a room full of people. Their faces were shadowed to preserve anonymity. "I read an article in the Enquirer about someone who'd seen a man who could fly -- a man with red eyes and pointy white fangs," someone was saying. "It sounded silly to me at first, but then I started having memories. I, too, had seen a vampire. It was the scariest thing that's ever happened to me."

"That is a typical story you would hear if you attended a meeting of 'Vampire Victims Anonymous,'" a male voice intoned as the camera continued to pan the meeting room to show people nodding their heads in sympathy. "Much like UFO abductees, these people truly believe that what they are remembering really happened to them. And they are seeking support."

Tawny was no longer listening to the TV journalist's words. The story had sent a shiver of recognition down her spine. It wasn't exactly a memory. She'd been plagued by a recurring dream in which was she being pursued by two very sinister looking men with long fangs. No matter how fast she ran, the men would keep closing in on her until finally her terror would awaken her. How many times had she had that dream now? Shuddering, she reached for the remote control to change the channel, hoping to remove the disturbing thoughts from her mind by merely pressing a button.

Across town, in a nightclub called The Raven, several people gathered around a TV screen were having a very different response to the news broadcast about "Vampire Victims Anonymous."

"Wow, like how do I meet one of these vampires?" breathed a young mortal woman dressed completely in black.

Janette rolled her eyes. Some of her clients were certainly enamored of the fantasy of death -- as long as it was just a fantasy. She saw Alma move a few steps toward the woman in black. In an instant Janette's hand was on Alma's shoulder, her nails digging in slightly.

Alma turned to see Janette's expression of "don't even think about it." Alma flashed back a mock-innocent look of "who me?" But she knew to back off.

"You want to meet a vampire? Well, here I am," said a mortal male, also dressed entirely in black. He opened his mouth to reveal two obviously plastic fangs.

Several onlookers laughed, though mortals and vampires had very different reasons to find this funny.

Janette didn't think it was funny at all. The news broadcast wasn't amusing either. She was old enough to know such things could only mean trouble. A popular song began and she was relieved to see the crowd disperse as people headed toward the dance floor.

* * *

Tawny was running through the deserted halls of the TV station. A few feet behind her, two zombie-like creatures approached, their mouths hanging open, long fangs gleaming. She darted into a staircase and hurried to the floor below. There they were again coming toward her! She turned, running faster, hearing their steady plodding footsteps behind her. Suddenly that nice detective from the police department, Nick Knight, appeared in front of her.

"Oh, thank heavens," she sighed aloud.

As if in answer, Detective Knight opened his mouth and snarled, his teeth as sharp and pointed as those of her pursuers.

Tawny screamed . . . and found herself awake in her bed, the blankets twisted as if she had been struggling to escape them.

She sat up in bed, trying to remember. Detective Knight . . . yes, he had been there. And she had seen him fly! Her mouth hung open as that memory returned. It *had* happened. She was almost sure of it now.

* * *

Janette was seated in her usual spot, sipping from her wine goblet. She smiled as she saw Nick weaving his way across the dance floor toward her.

"And to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" she asked with a smile, kissing him hello. She made sure there was just a little of the wine-blood mixture on her lips so that Nick was sure to taste what he was missing. Ah, he was so much fun to torment!

Nick smiled back at her, unconsciously licking his lips. "I've had a most disturbing phone call," he said, sliding onto the bar stool next to hers.

"Oh?"

"Remember Tawny Teller?"

Janette nodded.

"She phoned me early this evening, as I was getting ready for work." He looked around the bar to be sure there was no one within hearing range, then lowered his voice. "Tawny is saying she knows who I am. What I am. She told me she plans to go to 'Vampire Victims Anonymous', whatever that is, and that they will help her remember more. Janette, she is threatening to expose me."

"I thought you took care of her, Nickolah," Janette said sharply.

"I did," Nick insisted.

Janette thought about it for a moment. "Occasionally the hypnosis does not last. You know that, Nickolah. Only now, instead of an isolated person remembering and being thought to be crazy if he tells anyone, there is the television and the newspapers letting such a person know he or she is not the only one." She laughed sarcastically. "Once again this modern technology gets in our way."

"So, what do I do? Corner her and make her forget again? As if she hasn't been through enough." Nick shook his head. No matter how hard he tried to avoid it, he was still causing others to suffer.

"And if you don't make her forget, and she succeeds in getting empirical evidence against you, you *know* what will happen next," Janette reminded him. She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply as she waited for Nick to consider her words.

"I guess you're right," he said finally.

"Of course I am right," she answered.

"I've got to be going." He kissed her again, and stood. "Thank you," he added.

"Anytime, cheri," she said as she watched him leave. She sensed reluctance on his part, and that worried her. Nicholah's concern for mortals would be his downfall one of these days.

* * *

After glancing at the newspaper clipping one last time to make sure she'd read the date, time and location correctly, Tawny walked into a dimly lit church basement room, where several people were already seated on folding chairs that had been placed in a circle. Tawny cleared her throat. "Excuse me, is this . . . Vampire Victims Anonymous?" She steeled herself for laughter if she was in fact in the wrong place.

"Sure is," a middle aged gentleman answered.

Relieved, Tawny sat down, draping her jacket over the back of the chair. A young red-haired woman handed her a flier that explained the group's purpose. She glanced at it quickly, then folded it, sliding it into her purse.

"Hey, aren't you Tawny Teller? From the 11:00 news?" a man piped up.

Tawny stiffened. Great. She could see the tabloid headline now: "TV Journalist believes she's seen a vampire!"

"Now, Henry, remember the rules of this group," the woman who had given her the flier admonished.

"Anonymity must be preserved. What is said in this room stays in this room," Henry said, obviously from rote memory.

"That's correct. We must all feel comfortable sharing here. Now, my name is Martha," the woman continued. "Tonight I will be telling my story."

Tawny sat quietly and listened, feeling more and more relieved as the meeting continued. Maybe she wasn't crazy, after all. She decided not to tell them that she'd actually made accusations toward someone she suspected of being a vampire. She knew that had been a bad idea. But these people would understand

how she could have done something so impulsive, how fear had made her lose sight of common sense. Yes, she had definitely come to the right place.

As she stepped out of the church, a blast of cold air hit her. She huddled into her light jacket. Tawny hated when the weather changed so suddenly. She could see her breath in the night air as she headed toward her car.

A pretty, dark-haired young woman approached her. "Excuse me, is this the location of the 'Vampire Victims Anonymous' meeting?"

"Yes, it is," Tawny answered. "But I'm afraid you just missed it. It was from 7 to 8 pm."

"Ah, then I came all this way for nothing," the woman said, a trace of a foreign accent in her speech.

Tawny felt lightheaded suddenly as the woman looked directly into her eyes. A voice that seemed almost to be inside her head was saying, "You had some bad dreams. That is all."

"Bad dreams," Tawny repeated, transfixed.

"They do not mean anything. You will not have them any more. You will forget."

"Forget," she repeated.

Tawny blinked. She had completely blanked out for a moment. She must be more exhausted than she had realized. "I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

"I asked if I would see you at the next meeting," the woman replied.

"No, I don't think so." What had ever possessed her to go to that meeting? Had she thought there was a story in it somewhere? There was no such thing as vampires. This poor woman, actually believing such a thing.

"Well, have a good evening," the woman said.

"You too."

* * *

Janette had a satisfied smile on her face as she watched Tawny unlock her car and get in. Nickolah was going to owe her for this one.

The End

The Clearing

by Margaret Newman

"Sniff the wind, Nicholas," LaCroix whispered, leaning over his student's shoulder, breathing into his ear. "Listen to the woods."

He could feel Nicholas' excitement, the young man's body tingling with response to the night. It was just Nicholas and LaCroix and the world in this clearing. Janette had been left to her own pleasures in the village far below them in the valley.

"What do you hear?" LaCroix moved, and hissed into Nicholas' other ear. His hands on Nicholas' shoulders gripped tightly. "What do you smell, Nicholas?"

"So many sounds!" Nicholas lifted his head, a breeze playing over them, and he breathed in all the variety of scents. "So many scents!"

"Can you hear the heartbeats of the forest creatures?" LaCroix asked, kneeling down, one hand on the ground, one hand clutching the back of Nicholas' thigh. "Can you smell their blood?"

"Yes," Nicholas moaned, wavering. His knees buckled, and he ended up collapsing on the ground beside LaCroix. "Such heady wine." He looked at his teacher, his master, his friend. "It's overwhelming."

LaCroix smiled, ruffling Nicholas' hair. They were closer at this moment than they had been since that first night. He let the silence lengthen, his eyes locked onto Nicholas', and allowed their bond to strengthen.

"Do you know where we are, Nicholas?" He asked, his voice now in a hushed whisper. He held the nape of Nicholas' neck tightly. "Do you?"

"Where we are?" Nicholas frowned, puzzled. Glancing around the clearing, towards the woods. "Where we are." Realizing there was depth to the question.

"We are like gods!" LaCroix stood, pulling his son up with him. "We can create life, destroy life -- as we chose. The mortals are only here for our entertainment. Nicholas . . ." he purred, "*we* are the center of the universe! Everything and everyone revolves around us. Do you see the glory in that? The power? Such heady wine, indeed!"

Nicholas stared up at the night sky. A voice, far in the back of his conscience, murmured. A spark flickered and ignited. Were they not more like devils than gods? What right had they to proclaim themselves gods?

His hand now resting lightly on the young man's shoulder, LaCroix sensed the perverse spark within Nicholas. He pulled the young man close, forcing their gazes to meet, their noses less than a hair's breadth apart.

"Do you doubt me, Nicholas?" he asked, his voice congenial as a cobra about to strike. "Would I lie to you?"

Nicholas smiled, shaking his head. "No, you would not." The spark flickered and died. "I am hungry." He turned, and contemplated the view of the valley below them. "Look, supper awaits us. Blondes or brunettes tonight?"

"Such a dilemma," LaCroix sighed dramatically. "Why not one of each?"

* * *

Nick leaned against the railing that ran along the upper level of the mall. He watched the people walking below him, glanced to the other side of the second level and saw how the people scurried about up here. He smiled absently, his eyes wandering up to the glass and metal tiered dome that ran the length of the mall. The sky was black through the glass, no stars being visible from here.

He had come here tonight to buy something for Natalie. A present, something to make up for the way he had behaved the other night. He would never do anything to hurt Natalie, verbally or otherwise, but occasionally his temper got away from him -- and his guilt -- and pushed towards the edge of control. He sighed, drumming his fingers on the metal railing. He had seen nothing here that he could give her. Just the right thing, just that certain something that would stand out and say, "I am for Natalie!" eluded him.

"Problems, Nicholas?" LaCroix asked, coming up beside him, a hand gliding along the railing. Nick glanced up at him, surprised. He had not felt the other vampire approach. "You look quite puzzled."

"Nothing in particular." He shrugged. Gone was the quiet moment of existence. Shopping for a gift for Nat was now lost. The tension stood between them as solidly as if it were a person. Or a wall.

"I find the places such as these very entertaining." LaCroix turned, leaning against the railing as Nick did.

"Shouldn't you be at the radio station?" Nick countered testily.

"Shouldn't you be patrolling the streets, protecting the innocent citizens?" He chuckled lightly. "Janette says that you've been in a bad mood of late."

"She talks too much." Nick straightened, pushing himself away from the rail as if he were leaving. LaCroix looked at him, and their eyes locked. "I have a great many demons haunting me. It's not so much that I am in a bad mood as that I have an occasional good mood."

"You always have been too melodramatic." He reached out and straightened a flap of Nick's coat. "I had thought you would mellow with age."

"That isn't the only thought you had about me that didn't work out." Nick shrugged. "Are you here for any special reason?"

"Or did I just happen by to torment you?" LaCroix left the railing, walking by Nick, nudging him to follow. They walked down the length of the mall, neither speaking. They slowed near the escalators. A young woman, of average height and average looks, came up one escalator with her hands full of shopping bags. As she reached the top, a few of the bags escaped her hold, and fell onto the landing. A man behind her pushed her aside irritably, stepped on a few of her items, and strode by.

"Let me help," Nick said to her, immediately kneeling to pick up her things. "This looks broken. Perhaps you can return it?"

"Oh, thank you." She seemed quite surprised by his gallantry. She saw the man standing behind him, leaning against a column, arms cross over his chest.

"Nicholas, ever the knight in shining armor," the man quipped.

"I really shouldn't have gone overboard. It's just been such a rotten week." She smiled at Nick hesitantly.

"One good idea is to make trips to your car often. It's a safety tip. Fewer bags, less chance of getting mugged." He stood, holding the bags out to her. "Less chance of dropping anything on the escalator."

"How amusing," LaCroix chuckled dryly.

"Thanks, really." She frowned, glancing at the other man, and then back at Nick. She smiled at him, taking the bags. "Have a nice night."

"You, too." He nodded, and she walked off.

"Too bad she's a red head. I seem to remember you preferred blondes." LaCroix joined Nick.

"Tastes change." He shrugged. "People change, times change."

"The only thing that stays the same. . . ? No, I don't think so. People don't change. You are still the Nicholas I first met in 1228." They took a few steps in unison, but Nick stopped at these words. LaCroix turned back towards him, eyebrow raised questioningly. "You simply refuse to accept the gift I gave you."

It was on Nick's lips to argue, to rebut those words. What good would it do, though? It is not as if suddenly LaCroix would hear him, understand or believe him. It's not as if he would suddenly give into LaCroix. Why fight in the middle of the mall?

"Like she said, it's been a long week." Nick sighed, slipping his hands into his pockets. "I'd better get going. I need to stop in at the precinct on my way home."

LaCroix smiled, knowing that Nick wasn't giving up, he was just refusing to argue tonight. He patted Nick's shoulder companionably.

"All right, my friend. Off to your little playworld. Perhaps we can go, I believe the term is 'mallng,' again sometime." He turned and walked away from Nick. He knew Nick watched him, all the way to the Bernet department store.

Nick sighed, shook his head, and turned to the entrance. So many sounds, so many scents. He put on his sunglasses, heading off for the Caddy. Had this mall been a clearing once, before man and civilization had arrived?

The End

FOREVER

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Nicholas and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Night

A Parody
by Diane Echelbarger

(With apologies to Judith Viorst)

I went to sleep with a bottle of blood in my hand and now there's blood all over my couch and when I got off the couch tonight I stepped on the remote and the blinds went up and the sun hadn't set yet and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad night.

When I got to the station, Stonetree was eating blueberry muffins, and Schanke was eating souvlaki with extra garlic, and a suspect was bleeding on the floor and I hadn't had any breakfast because my last bottle of blood was all over the couch.

I want to be mortal.

I drove out to contact an informant, and had a really BAD flashback about LaCroix in the middle of traffic, and nearly married the Caddy to a semi, and the left front fender got creased. The informant didn't show.

I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad night

Back at the station, Stonetree said I had to testify on Tuesday, in the daytime. Schanke teased me about the dent in the Caddy. Then Stonetree said I was too far behind in my paperwork. Who cares about paperwork?

I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad night.

I could tell because Schanke tried to get me to buy tickets to his church picnic. He said I could always sit in the shelter if I was worried about UV, and Myra had a friend she could fix me up with, and Nat was going with Myra's cousin, and why not?

I hate picnics, I said to Schanke. I hope it rains on your stupid picnic and you trip in the three legged race and break your neck.

The whole squadroom ordered Chinese delivered in for lunch. The special was garlic chicken. Guess who didn't get any lunch?

It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad night.

That's what it was, because after lunch I went after some punk with an Uzi, shooting people from an overpass, and he almost got away because some idiot with a minicam wanted to make it on "I Witness Video," so I couldn't fly after the guy, and when I finally cornered him the punk put 20 bullet holes through my favorite tweed jacket. Then I went to The Raven and Janette said someone had seen LaCroix in town. LaCroix's dead, I told her. That's not what I heard, she said. You'd better be careful, Nikolah. He's very angry with you.

I wish I were mortal, I said.

On the way out some mortal punk spilled cabernet on my white shirt and the bouncer wouldn't let me hit him, and when I got outside someone had stolen the hubcaps off the Caddy and

before I could call in, a traffic cop came by and said I was parked in a No Parking zone and then the station called to say the informant who hadn't shown earlier hadn't shown because he was under a bridge, dead, and I had to get down to the morgue.

I am having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad night, I told the dispatcher. He didn't even answer.

So then I went to the morgue to look at the body. His throat had been slit. There was lots of blood. Not to mention the stuff in the fridge. Nat said I couldn't have any. She made me some tea, instead, but she couldn't make me drink it.

When I got back to the office, Stonetree wanted my report on that drive-by last night, but I forgot. He also said to do the Mounted a favor and escort a perp out there for them, and I was nice as could be until the punk tried to make a run for it. They said I used excessive force, but the guy was only limping a little. The Mounted said, please don't do them any more favors.

It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad night.

I had to do paperwork the rest of shift, and I hate paperwork.

Tony Mariducci's wife brought him spaghetti with garlic bread for dinner, and I REALLY hate garlic.

My report was mis-filed, my pen ran out of ink, my disc drive crashed, and the reweavers called to say it wasn't worth fixing the bullet holes in my blazer any more. I hate bullet holes.

When I got off duty, I went to the morgue, and Nat's assistant asked me if I was taking Nat out for a bite and Nat tried to get me to eat something and I couldn't talk her into a transfusion.

Nat said, what's the matter, Nick, someone tell you this'd be easy?

It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad night.

Nat says some nights are like that.

Even for mortals.

The End

Experiment

by Sharon S. Scott

"Don't do this to me, Nick. You know I can't..."

"Can't? Why not? You've done it to me before."

"Yeah, but I had done some research those other times. This stuff..."

"If I'm willing to try it, why aren't you?"

"Because I don't know what it could do to you."

"It can't kill me, Nat."

"Oh, that's helpful."

"We've tried garlic pills, protein drinks, herbal tea -- you had no idea what those would do to me. The garlic pills were... well, all I can say is they gave me quite a turn, made me ask myself whether you were trying to help me or hurt me. The drinks just tasted awful. And remember the french fries and ketchup. I survived all of those things."

"Nick, I just don't know what could happen."

"So I'll absolve you of all responsibility in advance, okay? Okay?"

"Well, you've obviously already decided to do it, so why do you need me there?"

"Moral support."

"All right, you win. When and where?"

"My place. After work."

"Right. And you've got the stuff already?"

"Ready and waiting."

* * *

Nat rang the bell and Nick buzzed her in almost immediately. When the door opened, she saw him pacing back and forth in front of the dining table, his eyes flicking frequently to an object placed on top of the figurine at the center of the table. It was wrapped in silver foil.

"Nick, stop pacing and let's get on with it. One last time -- are you absolutely sure you want to do this?"

"I'm sure."

"Convinced yourself, have you?"

He stopped pacing and grinned. "Yeah."

"So let's get to it. I've got things to do."

"Okay." He approached the object on the table. Took it in his hand, carefully unwrapped it. Held it and looked at it a moment. Glanced up at Natalie, a questioning look in his eyes.

"Do you think I'm wrong in trying this? They say it's addictive."

"They also say it's sinfully good. So go on. Do it, Nick."

He dropped his eyes to the object in his hand, nodded, smelled the thing, and then slowly raised it to his lips and solemnly placed it on his tongue.

He began to choke.

"Nick, are you okay? Spit it out."

He waved her away, a look of determination on his face. He coughed a few times, and tried again.

Then he smiled.

Nat watched him carefully. "So, how do you feel? How is it?"

"It's wonderful, Nat. It tastes almost as good as it smells. Now I understand why people get such a kick out of it."

"Don't get carried away. Any faintness? Dizziness? Any ringing of the ears? Stomach problems?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I feel great!"

"That's good, Nick. But hold your horses -- I know you think this is a major breakthrough, but we need to do a great deal more experimentation to find out the long-term effects."

"Nat, this is wonderful! Just the thought of what I've been missing all these years . . . More, I want more!"

"Don't get greedy. Wait and see what happens before you get all excited -- there might possibly be some side effects."

"You don't have any in your purse, do you?"

"No, Nick, I don't. You're acting like a kid in a . . . oh, get a grip on yourself, okay?"

"Okay, but I'm telling you, Nat, I *like* the stuff!"

"Yeah, I do, too. It's one of the pleasures of life -- but I warn you, it's been the downfall of many a diet. Something you haven't had to worry about for quite a few centuries. Now calm down and go get some sleep. I'll check in with you tomorrow." She gathered up her coat and started for the door.

"Thank you, Nat."

"For what? All I did was watch."

"Thanks anyway."

She opened the door and turned back to look at him. He was sitting at the table, smoothing out the tiny square of silver foil with his fingers, again and again.

He did look like a kid in a candy store. And if he got this excited over one Hershey's Kiss, she hated to think what he'd do over a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.

The End

How the West Wasn't Won

or

"I'm sorry, could you explain that 'Code' thing to me again?"

by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons

There once was a Cowboy rode outa the West,
With a steely glint in his eye.
He slept through the day, 'cos the nighttime was best,
'Sides, if the sun hit him, he'd fry.

Pursued by another (who once was a brother),
He soujourned the day in a cave.
When his new-found friend killed him, the drug only chilled him,
Then the Preacherman chomped on the knave.

Later that night when they flew into town,
(After eatin' the Cowboy's horse)
The Gal showed the Cowboy her new red silk gown,
Whilst ignorin' the Cowboy's remorse.

Then the Preacher pulled out the Wanted handbill
And the smile died on her sweet lips,
She knew who that night she was goin' to kill:
The artist. He'd die slow, from sips.

So that is the end of my story
'Bout the Preacher, the Cowboy, the Gal.
The moral is sad and it's sorry:
Ya cain't never trust an old pal.

(and that moral makes about as much (non) sense as the actual & confused moral of the episode, The Code. Thanks to all who gave me the horse picnic and Janette ideas on the Spoiler List, the above is your fault, too.)

Walk On By

by Susan M. Garrett

Natalie walked down the steps of the precinct station, the careful smile still in place. It was easier this way. It *had* to be easier. Too much, too soon was always a danger. Take things slow, that was the answer. There was still too much left to do, in so many ways.

It was still early evening and she fell into step with the other pedestrian traffic -- a few other precinct employees coming off shift and heading for their cars, couples who had just parked and were heading downtown for dinner, and people going wherever it was people went that time of night. Not much of a crowd, but enough. She was glad of the company, knowing that she could use any edge she could find, any help she could get.

Because Nick couldn't help her -- not just now. Oh, he might have if he'd known and he would have known if he'd thought about it, but Nick being Nick and all things being equal he was still too wrapped up with the events of the previous evening to even consider what might and might not be true. He was content to accept what he thought she said. It was easier that way.

Not knowing was always easier.

So she stared straight ahead, the smile still in place, glancing only occasionally to the side, concentrating on the ride home and picking up Sidney on the way -- he'd be annoyed that she'd left him overnight at the groomer, but at least he'd be less mangy.

When she saw him, she didn't even blink. She expected to see him -- it only made sense. Like father, like son, wasn't that how it went? They were so predictable at times . . .

Her smile never wavered. In fact, she met his eyes for a brief second, brushing past that penetrating, challenging stare with a complete lack of recognition, the gaze of a stranger. It helped that she was ready for him.

Natalie doubted her heartbeat changed its rhythm. Her stride remained constant. She swept by LaCroix as if he were just another pedestrian on an errand. Ignoring him would have given away the game, but the studied indifference of a passerby, the glance and nothing more, was the one thing that would save her.

It took no more than a second. She was suddenly conscious of the air around her as she moved, the hardness of the concrete sidewalk beneath her shoes. Everything seemed very sharp and brilliant, as if the world had been outlined with heavy black edges to accentuate the reality of the moment.

Once before, she'd felt this way. Once before she'd brushed past a vampire, knowing that she was being watched. She'd turned and challenged him, her ego and her curiosity having gotten the better of her. But that had been Nick.

And this was LaCroix.

So she kept walking. Perhaps her heart did beat a little faster, as the distance between them increased. Her steps might have quickened just a bit, her mouth grew dry -- somehow, she knew that he hadn't moved. LaCroix was still standing there.

But he hadn't come after her, either.

Natalie fished in her purse for her car keys and unlocked the car door. On auto-pilot, she performed the motions independent of thought and yet utterly and completely aware of every sound and feeling, from the click of the key as it fit into the ignition, to the tickle of the keychain against her hand as she wrapped her fingers around the steering wheel.

He was still there as she passed, raising his eyes to look at her as she drove away. Again, there was no more than a casual glance -- she was the epitome of the careful driver intent on not incurring the city's wrath by mowing down pedestrians in her path.

After two blocks, Natalie dared to take a deep breath. Another traffic light and she managed a sigh, her hands shaking slightly as she gripped the wheel to pin herself to the place and time.

There was still the chance that he'd follow her home, that he'd be waiting for her, but she doubted it. She was only a mortal, not worth his time -- which was something of an insult, considering just how much time he had. Yet Natalie was almost certain that LaCroix would leave her alone.

The taste of the drug with which he'd spiked the champagne still lingered on her tongue, no matter how frequently she'd rinsed out her mouth or brushed her teeth. It was a side-effect that would be gone by the morning, but it was a reminder of how careful she had to be. Almost wasn't good enough -- would never be good enough. She'd have to be on her guard now, even more than before. She had to prepare for the next time.

And there *would* be a next time. Because she owed him.

For drugging her. For forcing her to let herself be seduced into near oblivion, counting on the fact that Nick would find her, Nick would save her. For the slightest of doubts that Nick would know, or that he'd be too late. For making Nick say all that he'd said, in hard words that chilled her flesh and her soul. For giving her no option but to play the pawn, to be silent and still as Nick pawed at her, his breath cold on her cheek, his lips soft against her skin, his teeth sharp and frightening as they grazed her neck. For making Nick believe that what they'd begun had been taken from her. For preventing her from slapping him for his arrogance and the unfairness of it all. For preventing her from throwing her arms around Nick's neck and returning that fierce and desperate hug when he thought he'd saved her, saved them both ...

For making her realize that she'd take Nick any way she could get him, no matter what the cost.

A bitter smile settled on her lips as Natalie drove home. Yes, she owed LaCroix. There'd be another time, another chance -- she had no doubt of that. They'd meet again.

Until then, she'd bide her time and let them think they'd taken her memory. Back to being friends, or just a bit more than friends, but not too much more. Back to walking that fine, nonexistent line that defined 'him' and 'her,' but not 'them.' Back to being almost safe and almost happy.

It was easier that way. Wasn't it?

And by the time she'd pulled into the parking lot, she'd almost decided that it was.

The End

Partners of the Month: The Unseen Scenes

by Pamela Rush

Foreword: We know there were scenes filmed for "Partners of the Month" (an episode in which Schanke is forced to move in with Knight when Myra throws him out of the house) that ended up on the cutting room floor. There must have been scenes written that were never filmed, scenes imagined that were never written, and then, I suppose, there are the scenes that were unimaginable . . . until now . . .

Scene #1: "I'm home, dear."

Knight opened his own door timidly and with considerable trepidation. He was relieved when no garlic odor assaulted him, but he shivered nervously as he detected the fragrance of coriander, cardamom and olive oil in the air as well as the stronger bouquet of imported chevre wafting from the kitchen along with the clink of utensils and the hissing of some savory concoction rising to a simmer.

He wondered desperately if it were really too late to beg to sleep on Natalie's sofa today.

"Nick! There you are! Next time you're gonna be late; call me!" Schanke scolded, looking up from a stockpot, the steam circling his head like a halo. "Another five minutes and this would've been ruined."

**ADULT version of previous paragraph follows.
G & PG readers please close eyes firmly
and skip the next 10 lines.**

"Nick! There you are! Next time you're gonna be late, call me!" Schanke scolded, hitching up the bath towel draped precariously around his waist. "Another five minutes and this would've been ruined." The kitchen was steamy with heat rising from simmering pots and flushed, naked skin. Muscles tensed and rippled as Don stirred the bubbling sauce. The mixture was redolent with spices that hinted at languorous sub-tropical nights with only the sea breezes to cool scorching desires. Don's warm brown eyes, like pools of chocolate at body temperature, smoldered as he sampled the concoction. His tongue slid sensuously over the smooth, round spoon, licking up the last drops of the creamy liquid. It was so luscious that only the towel stood between Don and nuclear meltdown in the kitchen.

Too bad the *food* and the *view* were wasted on Knight.

**END OF ADULT MATERIAL.
RESUME PG VERSION WITH CLOTHING.**

"Uh, Schank, you shouldn't have. Your *really* shouldn't have. You know I can't eat --"

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard all about your allergies and your macro-diet for -- What? Three or four years now? Believe me, it wasn't easy, but I found a veggie recipe that looks half-way decent: low salt, low fat, complex carbs -- And it only took two and a half hours to make! The least you can do is *try* it," he said,

pinning Knight with a hopeful gaze.

"Sure, Schank," he acquiesced, suckered by the soulful brown eyes. How bad could it be? He was practiced in pushing stuff around on a plate and compressing bits of some colors under piles of other colors until it looked as though someone might have eaten something off the plate when he "dined" with Natalie. He could do as much for his partner. "It smells just . . . just . . . *incredible*."

"Here we go--" Schanke muttered as he shook the pasta in the colander. And, too softly for Knight to have heard had he not been endowed with supernaturally keen senses, "Yes, sir . . . We don't need no stinkin' women . . ."

Scene #2: The B-B-Q Scene

"You barbequed a *WHAT* in my tanning bed??!!"

Scene #3: The Answering Machine Scene

R-I-I-I-N-G! R-I-I-I-N-G!

Lambert chewed on the end of a pencil as she waited impatiently for the fourth ring, the one that would trigger the answering machine.

R-I-I-I-N-G! R-I-I-I-

w-h-i-i-i-i-r, crackle . . .

"Hi! Neither Don nor Nick is able to come to the phone right now, but leave us a message and one of us will get back to you, especially if you're a *hot* babe! Just ki--"

"Gimme *that*!"

"--ddin'. Hey! I'm not finished--"

"Yes, you *are*!"

"You have *no* sense of humor, whatsoever, you know that?"

"Oh, yeah? What if Myra calls, huh?"

"Myra?! . . . well, so what if she does, huh? She's not my--"

"Or . . . Captain Cohen?! Huh? Yeah! Didja think abou--"

B-E-E-E-E-E-E-P. w-h-i-i-i-i-r . . .

Scene #4: The Soap Opera Scene

"... la vo-gl'i-o -- la r-e-nderete --!"

His dreams were infiltrated, not unpleasantly, by someone mourning for his lost daughter in Italian, rendered in an untrained but agreeable baritone. Hhmmm . . . Don really knew his Verdi. Not really Knight's favorite composer, but LaCroix would enjoy it.

LaCroix and Schanke.

His subconscious mind meandered on for a moment longer before his conscious mind, appalled at the juxtaposition, jumped on it and pummeled it furiously. The two insulted each other's personal habits for a millisecond -- a very long time for the subconscious mind but hardly long enough for the conscious side to warm up, a situation to which it was unfortunately accustomed -- before they both threw the alarm switch.

Blue eyes popped open with none of the usual sluggardly transition from dreams to red alert.

Jeeze. What a wake up call.

"... ma mia f-i-g-l-i-a e imp-a-g-a-bile te s-o-o-o-o-o-r --"

The clang of elderly plumbing accompanied the singer's dramatic crescendo. Good. If Schanke finished in the bathroom early, he wouldn't have to hurry himself while his roomie whistled impatiently in the hallway. Perhaps Don would even be dressed, fed and gone before Nick managed to drag himself out of the shower.

Two minutes later Knight averted his eyes from his disgustingly fresh, shaved and cheerful looking roommate as they passed in the upper hall; he was not an early evening person himself. The bathroom door shivered only slightly from the force with which he closed it behind him.

Almost immediately, it shook from the force with which he threw it open again.

"Schank!"

"What?"

"Come back here!"

"Huh?"

"Look at this!"

His partner looked in the open doorway and surveyed the scene thoughtfully; Knight leaned haggardly against the sink.

"What? That mess was already there; I can't help it if you have too many little gizmos on the sink. I can understand an electric toothbrush and the WaterPic; I've even seen those little electronic gum massagers before, but, jeeze, Nick, does anyone really need an electric flosser? You sure have great dental hygiene for someone who never eats anything."

"That's *not* what I was complaining about! Look at this mess!" Knight encompassed the rest of the steamy room with his gesture. "I meant the wet towels on the floor, the shaving cream all over the mirror, the soap on the floor of the shower, the . . . uh, I don't wanna know, do I . . . 'laundry' in the corner and . . . and . . ." His eyes grew rounder as they discovered a new insult: "Did you *use* my razor?! I can't believe-- You *used* my razor!"

"Jeeze, Nick, it's not like I shaved my legs with it! You should see what Myra does to mine. I ran out of disposables; I'll stop and get a pack tonight, ok?"

"I can't even take my shower--"

"Oh, don't be such a baby--"

"Oh, yeah? There are no dry towels! None!"

"Well, when that happens, you get a dirty one out of the hamper--"

"Oh, yech!"

"--and later you, er, do some laundry, I guess. I'll do the laundry later. It's my fault we used so many towels, I guess," he admitted magnanimously.

"Look . . . look at that! You left the soap in a puddle and it's all squidgy."

"Squidgy?"

"Yeah! Squidgy. How do you expect--"

"Nick, Nick--" Schanke offered gently, "let me give you some free advice. Grown men don't say 'squidgy.' Say that in front of Cohen and your career is down the old U-trap, if you get my drift."

"Well, what would you call it?"

"'Real' men don't complain about personal hygiene!" he said over his shoulder, disappearing out of the doorway.

"That's easy for you to say!" Knight called after him, raising his voice several notches. "*Your* soap wasn't all SQUIDGY!"

Scene # 5: Schanke Pops in at the Coroner's Office

"Hey, Nat!"

"Hey, Schank," she replied, glancing up from the piles of paperwork that formed a small volcanic cone on her desk. "How's it going?"

"Fine. Just . . . fine."

"Oh, yeah? You wouldn't kid your old Auntie Natalie, would you?"

"No, really -- What's the big deal? I'm a grown man. I can take care of myself. But, you know, Nat," his voiced dropped to confidential tones, "I am a little worried about Nick. I *know* about the allergies and stuff, but, really, do you think he could be smoking us?"

"Huh?!" she asked, totally adrift but vaguely alarmed.

"You know. Covering up."

"Covering . . . er, as in, uh, covering up *what*?" she gulped.

"Something more serious."

"Like . . . ?"

"Well, I've read about this -- Oh, it was on television, too; on those, you know, talk shows -- I know it's a . . . a weird idea, but it *fits*."

"How . . . weird . . . is it?"

"You know, those eating things."

"*Things* that . . . eat . . . er, weird things?"

"Uh, no, Nat. *People* who have weird eating habits." He looked at her a little strangely.

Although not precisely clear on where they were going yet, Lambert felt that they had probably cleared the mountain top and were descending into safer -- if improbable -- conversational territory.

"Weird eating habits?"

"Yeah, like anorexia or bulimia or something. I *swear*, Nat, the man hasn't put solid food in his mouth for three whole days! You can't tell me that it's normal . . . or healthy. I made him a special dinner last night and he just pushed the food around on his plate and hid the lentils under the pasta; I could spot it a mile away 'cause it's what Jenny does when she doesn't want to eat something."

"Hhmmm. Well, I sympathize with you, Schank, but I wouldn't worry about it too much. I imagine that you've just caught him at an off moment. Maybe he's a little tense right now--"

"Right now? More than usual? Why?"

Lambert could feel her eyes crossing with the effort to remain straight-faced at this provocation. "Oh, who knows? You know how uncommunicative he is!" Two pairs of eyes rolled up simultaneously in total philosophical accord.

"But . . ." she searched for something to say to satisfy and reassure, "you know, he's such a . . ." -- she rejected several true but pointlessly exasperating descriptors in favor of meaningless comfort (goodness knows she'd had enough experience formulating them for herself)-- "*loner* -- Some times these guys turn it all inwards when they have a problem and get very . . . isolated. What Nick needs is . . . a friend. He

needs your support and confidence now. Just be . . . understanding. And don't insist on his eating if he, uh, doesn't feel like it."

As Schanke nodded his comprehension, Grace came into the lab with an armful of folders. She smiled broadly at the detective and heaved the paperwork atop the towering piles already accumulated on Natalie's desk.

"So -- Just be supportive and understanding, huh?" Schanke repeated.

"Yeah. I think that's really all he needs."

"Okay. Thanks a lot for the advice, Nat. Bye-bye, Grace. Catch ya later, Nat."

"Any time."

Grace sent a slightly puzzled look after the retreating figure. "Is the Doctor 'IN' again, Doctor?"

"Schanke has a little . . . little, er, personal problem."

"Uh, Natalie, I heard that he and his wife *separated*. You think that's a 'little' problem?"

"Oh! That! I didn't mean that. Of course, that *is* serious, but this was, er, something else . . ."

"Then what--?"

"Nothing much. He moved in with Nick and you know how moody and unreliable Nick can be. Naturally, there is a period when they both have to make some adjustments."

"*Your* Nick?" Grace said, looking startled.

"N-o-o-o-- Not *my* Nick. Nick Knight."

"Well."

Natalie bent her head back to her paperwork, which had somehow multiplied exponentially while she had been talking to Schanke. "Hmmm?" she said, absentmindedly.

"Well. That explains a lot."

"Explains what?" she queried, opening a new file with a sigh.

"Why you two . . . never . . . really . . ."

"Who two . . . ?" Natalie looked up, her attention reclaimed. But Grace was already sidling out of the door and answered only with a wave of her hand before she vanished.

Comprehension flickered across her face and she frowned. Then she smiled a little smile that really wasn't satisfied with itself until it grew into a full-fledged giggle. Oh, dear. Oh, well . . .

Oh, wait 'til Nick heard!

Scene #6: Knight Pops in at the Coroner's Office

"Hey, Nat," Knight smiled as he strolled through the lab door.

"Hey, yourself. How's it going?"

"Oh -- Fine." He crossed to her desk and leaned casually against it; it would have invited disaster to attempt to sit on it.

"Hhhmmm. I've heard *that* tone before. Tell your Auntie Natalie."

"Well, I *am* a little worried about Schanke. Nat, you don't think he'd do anything . . . foolish . . . do you?"

"I thought you thought that he's always fooling around."

"Nah -- I mean for *real*. I'm serious. He keeps up a good front -- he cooks, he does laundry, sort of -- but, he isn't sleeping. I swear, Nat, the man hasn't slept a wink for three whole days! It's not healthy! And he talks to himself. And he keeps singing "Rigoletto;" you know: the one with the dead daughter. You don't think he'd do anything . . . desperate, do you?"

"Desperate?"

"Like . . . hurt himself."

"Ah!"

"Well . . . ?"

"Professionally speaking, Nick," she said, trying to keep a straight face, "I know that he's going through a difficult period right now, but I think that Don has the basic, er, fortitude to deal with it. Really."

"Here are tho -- Oh!" Grace exclaimed, shouldering through the door with her hands full of a tray of specimens. "Hello, Detective Knight. Sorry, I didn't know you were--"

"Oh, I just dropped in for a minute. I won't distract her from work too long. So," he continued, looking down at Natalie, "you don't think there's any . . . ?"

"Oh, I think he needs your support and understanding right now. Just be . . . kind. And, uh, try to . . . make allowances until he feels more settled."

"Understanding. Right," he said, visibly taking up the burden of being his brother's keeper as he straightened. "Bye, ladies. Later . . ."

Grace's eyebrows rose as she followed his retreating figure. A strangled noise riveted her attention back on Natalie: the coroner had laid her face in her crossed arms on the top of her desk and was making strange sounds while her shoulders shook emotionally.

"Oh, honey! Natalie!" Grace exclaimed as she patted her back comfortingly. "Don't take on so. He's only

a man. No great loss. There're plenty of others out there -- Although -- the nerve! Asking *you* for advice about his . . . er . . . hmhmm . . ."

Natalie raised a face streaming with tears and searched for something to wipe her rather red nose. "No, no --" she mumbled inarticulately. "It's not what you -- I'm not crying -- Well, I *am*," she admitted, wiping her eyes, too, "but only from laughing so hard. Wait a minute. I gotta tell you about it before you, uh, get the wrong idea. Those two are -- They're --"

She grimaced through her tears and then started laughing uncontrollably again.

Scene #7: The After Dinner Conversation Scene

"So, what're we gonna do tomorrow night?"

"Uh, I'm off tomorrow night."

"Right. We're both off. That's the idea. What're we gonna do on our night off?"

"A-a-a-h, I think, er, I might have to put in some overtime. Actually. I'm way behind on paperwork and you know how the Captain is about that."

"Man-oh-man, Nick, that's why you need to *relax* when you do have a night off. No wonder you're so uptight. Forget work, forget Cohen-the-Hun, forget your, er, hangups and let go once in a while. I tell you, if you don't, you're gonna end up 'round the bend. *Farther* 'round the bend. That's why your digestion is shot to hell and you can't sleep all day."

"I can't *sleep* because you're either snoring like a gorilla or, worse, pacing the floor and moaning!"

"Look, here's what we'll do: we'll pick up the girls, have a little late dinner at the Rosedale -- not fancy, just nice -- *then* maybe take in a flick and we can loosen up at the 24-hour Bowlerama on Dupont. They serve a mean souvlaki at the Snack Bar."

"*GIRLS?! What girls?!*" As usual, Knight's voice tended towards the squeaky when he became overly excited. "We are *NOT* going to go out and pick up *girls!*"

"No-no! Jeeze, Knight, what kind of guy do you think I am?" Schanke huffed, offended. "Not pick-ups! *Our* girls -- Well, I mean, sort of . . . You and Nat, me and Janette. We'll double date."

"Argh! You can't take Janette out! Or anyone else. You're a married man! Besides, Janette wouldn't --"

"Wait -- I know what you're thinking. But it's not like that -- It's just, uh, you know, a friend thing. Janette and I kinda hit it off, you know, and it'll be like goin' out with the guys. Lookit the way you hang with Natalie all the time but you *say* you're just friends. See? Hey, we gotta get *out* of this place and *relax*, Nick. We're both going stir crazy."

"Well, there's one more thing you've forgotten: I bet you haven't asked Janette yet!"

Schanke smirked and extended his hand palm up.

"What?"

"Pay up."

"What!"

"Pay up. I asked. She accepted. I left a message for Nat, too, but you might want to call her. Women appreciate the personal touch, you know."

"I don't believe this!"

"Believe it. And pay me."

Scene #8: Janette and the Moose (or possibly Caribou) Pajamas Scene

"Janette!"

"You sound surprised to see me, Nicholah. I thought I had been invited?"

"Yeah, sure. But you usually don't bother to come in through the door, let alone buzz."

"Is this not the correct way to pick up a . . . date, then?"

"Uh . . ." words momentarily failed him, "look, Janette --" his voice dropped to a husky whisper and he darted a quick glance behind him to be sure that Schanke was not coming down stairs yet, "-- you can't possibly go through with this!"

"Nicolah! Do I hear you correctly? You are telling *me* what I cannot do? Again? Surely, by now, you know better."

"Let me put it another way: *why* would you *want* to go through with this?"

"But, Nicolah, I have *never* been on a 'double-date' before. It sounds . . . fascinating, *n'est ce pas?* At first, I did not think so, myself, but then Detective Schanke explained the customs to me --" Janette strolled languidly on into the sitting area and made herself comfortable. "Frankly, Nicolah, I find the prospect of you and Dr. Lambert, Detective Schanke and myself, and all this thing with the front seat and the back seat --" her gesture seated them in an imaginary Caddy "-- very . . . interesting. Did you know there is a social custom they actually call *necking*? And then Dr. Lambert and I will excuse ourselves to go to the Ladies' Room together! Just imagine!"

He did and turned a slightly more livid shade of deathly pale.

"Back sea--?! Wait -- We are *not* going to --" Knight finally had to stop and begin again in order to start a sentence he could finish. "We are going *bowling*! I mean, *if we were* going any place --"

"Whatever you call it --"

"No, the human sport; you know, like hockey. Have you ever been bowling?" he asked slyly.

"N-o-o-o . . ." at this she did look slightly apprehensive. "I thought that had gone out of style some time ago. But I was never interested in outdoor . . . sports, anyway."

"They do it *indoors* now, but I don't think it's going to appeal to your sense of style any more now than it did when they still bowled on greens. Really, Janette, you're just going to be very, very bored before this is over. Believe me.

"Maybe . . . maybe not." Her head turned gracefully, neck arched, towards the upper hallway as they both heard the distinctive tread of mortal feet from that direction.

"Oops!" Schanke looked mildly surprised and halted in mid step. "Hi, Janette! Didn't see ya there -- Jeeze, I'm sorry, but I'm not dressed yet. I'll just be a minute. Talk to Nat 'till -- Where's Nat?"

"Bon soir, Donald. Do not fret yourself; I was a tiny bit early myself. Dr. Lambert has not arrived yet, but I'm sure she will be here soon. I am *so* looking forward to this evening."

Knight choked on "Argh," or some such remark, under his breath and sat down suddenly, fortunately on a chair.

"Good, good!" Schanke moved closer to the railing and leaned over it, oblivious to his bathrobe falling open provocatively. "Nick tell you what we were thinking of? Dinner and a couple of frames of bowling? You, er, *do* like to bowl, don't you?"

By chance, he was wearing the moose (or possibly caribou) pajamas, crisply laundered and ever-so-slightly rumpled from a cozy day's repose. Janette, hitherto uninitiated in the overwhelming allure of the moose (or possibly caribou) pajamas, looked thunderstruck. Her eyes widened and her lower lip, slightly agape, quivered.

"Janette?"

"W-e-l-l," she drooled -- er, I mean drawled -- "maybe just a frame or two. And then, perhaps, we could have a little drink, Hhmmm?"

"Janette!" Knight whispered urgently, "I don't think tha--"

"I wasn't inviting *you*, Nicolah!" she replied sharply, waving to Schanke as he disappeared from the landing. "Tell me, Nicolah: what is a 'frame' and how long will a couple of them take?"

Scene #9: The Last Scene

R-I-I-I-N-G. R-I-I-I-N-G. R-I-I-I-N-G. R-I-I- *Crackle*

"Hey, this is the home of Don and Myra Schanke but we can't come to the phone right now 'cause we're too busy makin' hot, monkey --"

"Donnie! Stop that!"

scuffling sounds

"Aw, c'mon, honey. Everybody knows --"

giggling and panting sounds

"Give me that machine right now, Donald! I'll fix --"

B-E-E-E-P. *W-h-i-i-i-i-r...*

"Uh, Schank. This is Nick. Pick up if you're there . . . I really need to talk to you -- Oh. Uh . . . Well. Okay, *listen* then. Drop by on your way to work tonight. You left some stuff here you ought to pick up and, uh . . . there's something in the fridge . . . I think maybe it has, er, a lot of *garlic* in it . . . Know what I mean? You need to get it *out* of there before . . . before it *spoils* or something. Okay? I really mean it -- don't forget to stop *before* work. I need, er . . . I need the space in the fridge. Okay? Please . . . ?"

The End

What I learned from "Near Death". . .

by Pamela K. Rush

1. Death is like a day at the beach when you forgot your suit and towel.
2. LaCroix is a really Olympic class squinter.
3. An unclean soul is like having Spaghetti-O's all over your shirt.
4. The portal to the afterlife is a TARDIS!! Does this mean . . . ?
5. Unlife is unfair: Knight has one good hair day in 800 years and gets stuck with a Truly Awful Wardrobe day instead.

Those Left Behind

by Diane Trap

France, 1793

Nicola to her right, LaCroix to her left, her head on Nicola's shoulder, her eyes closed. The rocking of the carriage, and the darkness of its interior, with its windows painted black. LaCroix had paid the coachmen well; they wouldn't be disturbed while the sun still burned.

"Nicholas--" LaCroix's dry voice. If she opened her eyes she would see him in the white wig and silk culottes he wore in defiance of the republican radicals.

"*Sh. Elle dorme.*" Nicola shifted, just a little, then relaxed against the seat so he wouldn't disturb her. "*Donnez elle la couverture, s'il vous plait.*"

Nicola no longer powdered his hair, a waste of flour, he called it, when the Parisian peasants had no bread -- LaCroix had thanked him for taking steps to preserve their food supply. The wool of Nicola's coat was rough under her cheek, but he would always be her handsome chevalier, even if he insisted on dressing and talking like a Jacobin.

LaCroix gave her knee a squeeze, a gentle one, as he laid the heavy blanket over her, just to let her know that he knew she was faking her sleep, not that he minded. He settled back next to her.

Neither LaCroix nor Nicola spoke again. Their arguments were over; how silly they had sounded, shouting at each other over mortal politics! Now even Nicola agreed that Paris wasn't safe for anyone, not when even the mortals were drinking blood.

Paris was behind them, Austria too far ahead to worry about. It didn't matter that Paris was in flames, or that the border was closed by the revolutionary government; LaCroix and Nicola would keep her safe. As always.

Toronto, 1995

Janette opened her eyes. Someone was knocking at the door of her room -- and this was *her* room, more private than her bedroom, two floors above the Raven and off-limits to everyone.

Surely whoever it was would go away. Janette rose from her chair, her knees shaking and her veins hollow with hunger, and walked over to stop the gramophone before the needle wrecked itself against the paper center of the record. The gramophone was wedged in between an eight-track player and an Edison phonograph, a cassette player and a hi-fi -- there had barely been room on the shelves for the CD player. If Digital Audio Technology caught on, she would have to call in a carpenter again.

Janette rubbed her hand over her dry eyes and waited. Were they gone? No. The knocking began again. She hissed through her teeth and crossed the room.

Miklos' fist was raised for another knock when she jerked open the door. He dropped his hand but not his eyes under her fierce glare.

"I've locked up," he said. "The money's in the safe."

"And you came up here to tell me that?"

"No." His voice was calm. He fished in the pocket of his ragged black jeans. "I found this while I was cleaning up. I thought you'd like it."

He held out an earring, a silver hoop with three onyx drops hanging in the center. They shivered when he shrugged. "It's not a pair, but . . . it's pretty. I thought you could make it into a choker or something."

Black tears, Janette thought, and put a hand on the door jamb to steady herself. One for LaCroix, one for Nicola, and one for--

Miklos was still standing in the doorway, patiently holding out the earring, she realized with a start. Had it really been so long since someone had given her a gift simply because it was *pretty* that she didn't know what to do about it?

"I . . . thank you." Janette's fingers closed slowly around the silver hoop.

"It was a busy night," Miklos said. "Can I get you something? You look pale."

She took a step back, unwilling to shut the door on him. "It is only the heat."

Miklos' lips quirked. "Forty-four degrees outside and they still wear leather. The mortals are getting stranger every night."

Janette tried, but couldn't return the smile. She had poured herself her usual glass of wine-flavored blood just after the Raven had opened, but the first customers had been a dozen American teenagers who insisted they were old enough to drink; getting rid of them had been easy enough, but then the party of Don Constantine's soldiers had come in, demanding her *personal* attention, and then there was the lady handing out the religious pamphlets, herself harmless but on the verge of being tossed into an involuntary slam-dance with some of the less tolerant customers before Janette had found her, and then . . . at the end of the night her glass was still on the bar, still full, but Janette had had no stomach for it.

"You should feed," Miklos said.

He was right, of course, but then she would just be exhausted, not exhausted and hungry. Wallowing in misery was worth doing well.

Janette made her way to her chair and sat down before her knees gave way.

Miklos leaned against the doorjamb, his arms folded, his face impassive. "Nick hasn't been around lately."

"He hasn't wanted anything."

"You could call him."

"Yes." Janette rubbed one of the black tears between her finger and thumb. "Perhaps I could join him and

Dr. Lambert for an evening of videos and popcorn. How cozy."

Miklos wouldn't suggest she call LaCroix; he had a strong superstition against speaking of the devil. LaCroix would only laugh at her anyway, if he didn't decide to be angry. *What, my pretty little Janette*, he would say, *Tired from putting yourself at the beck and call of mortals? Was it for this that I made you what you are?*

She sighed and leaned back in her chair.

"You miss them."

"Watching daytime talk shows does not qualify you as a psychologist, Miklos," Janette answered severely. "I am only --"

She stopped before her voice could break. She held up the earring. The onyx drops shone dully, as if they absorbed light instead of reflecting it.

"I am only tired." She had meant her voice to be firm. She swallowed and tried again. "I am only tired. Tired of -- tired of -- needing them."

She let her hand fall into her lap. What was wrong with her, that she would say something like that, even at a whisper? Miklos examined his fingernails, still bleached white from the detergents in the glass washer.

"Before I was brought across," he said, his casual attitude thick enough to peel away in strips, "I buried both my parents."

"Were they dead first?"

He gave her the look he gave her when she teased him about the customers who would write their phone numbers on cocktail napkins and tuck them into his pants pockets.

"I still remember them, though," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "I remember how my mother would tuck me into bed when I was sick. The blankets weighed fifty pounds and her chicken soup was full of basil."

Janette's childhood memories were nothing to treasure. She had only Nicola, and LaCroix.

"I wouldn't go back, though." Miklos' deep-set brown eyes were firm and steady. "Maybe for an hour, or a day -- but I'm not their little Misha any more. Although it is strange that one of the things I miss about being mortal is not being able to catch a cold."

Little Misha? It was too incredible to imagine. She closed her eyes. There wasn't enough blood in Janette's body to make a decent tear.

"I bet they didn't teach you anything," Miklos said.

"They taught me everything," Janette retorted automatically, without enough heat in her voice to make it a protest worthy of the name.

"How to open a bank account? How to get a liquor license? How to hire a staff? They didn't teach you any of that."

Miklos was . . . Miklos was . . . he was her employee, Janette reminded herself. He had no right to speak to her this way, even if he was --

She opened her eyes. Miklos was picking at a splinter on the door jamb.

"You learned it all anyway," he said. "Even if Nick comes around, would you really want to be his little sister again?"

Or LaCroix's pretty little Janette. The thought couldn't be spoken aloud.

Miklos straightened. His black t-shirt still clung to him; the air-conditioners hadn't been able to compete with the heat. "The Raven's a good business, but I don't stay here because of Nick or . . . the other one."

Janette looked away. She rubbed the arms of her chair. "You should go. It's almost sunrise."

Miklos shrugged and nodded. He glanced down at his boots and scuffed a heel against the edge of the carpet. He took a hesitant step over the threshold and looked at Janette; when she didn't object he took another step toward her. When he reached her chair he picked up her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"*Bonne nuit, maitresse,*" he said, and turned and left.

Epilogue

It wasn't worth the money to redo the kitchen -- it wasn't as if she were going to be cooking. Still, Janette thought, she should really take the time to get a new refrigerator, or at least get the handle of the old one fixed. She found the screwdriver in the drawer of the peeling cabinets and jacked open the door of the avocado green Frigidaire.

Even cold, the first swallow of blood tasted good. She could feel her veins swelling with fresh fluid as she drank; she gasped with relief and took another swallow before she put the cork back on the bottle. She turned the hot water on full and put the bottle under it. While she waited for it to warm she flicked on the radio.

"This is the darkest, most desperate part of the night," the Nightcrawler said. "The hour when we must face up to what we really are."

Janette drummed her fingers on the kitchen counter.

"The hour when our ambitions are ridiculous, our accomplishments petty. The hour when the only thing that is of value is that which is lost." A dry chuckle drifted over the airwaves. "What have you done? What have you made? What have you lost? Is it really worth a moment's regret?"

The tap squeaked as Janette turned off the water.

"The lights are off, the sun is gone," the Nightcrawler continued. "There is no room for anything but honesty in the darkest part of the night."

Janette took the bottle out of the sink and a glass from the cupboard. If she set the glass on the counter a little harder than usual there was no one around to hear.

"If you make nothing, you lose nothing. If you lose nothing, there is nothing to regret." There was a deep breath, slowly released. "I have lost nothing. I regret nothing."

She turned off the radio. Sipping slowly at the glass in her hand, she stopped in her office to pick the cordless phone off the recharger and returned to her room.

She hummed a little as she turned the crank on the gramophone and set the turntable spinning. The plain paper label on the record said simply *À Janette* in Nicola's sprawling handwriting. She dialed the phone and put the needle on the record.

The Nightcrawler's number rang twice. "I thought you would call," LaCroix said.

Janette held the phone to the horn of the gramophone. A sweet duet, rebec and piano, began to play. LaCroix and Nicola had recorded it for her as a surprise, but how could it have been a surprise when all of London could have heard them arguing over the arrangement of the music? She smiled a little as she listened; her smile grew broader when the buzzing of the phone told her LaCroix had hung up.

If he had lost nothing, if he regretted nothing, then he should have been able to listen to the end of the record. It was very pretty music.

The End

Thanks to Cousin Caile for helping me with the French. All mistakes are mine.

**To My Dearest Children,
who have had a Close Call**
by Celeste Hotaling-Lyons

As you go through your after-life,
You'll travel long and far,
Through miles of joy and strife --
So, sonny, tidy up your car!
Don't leave old New York licenses
In glove compartments, full.
Should Don come to his senses,
He'll dismiss your line of bull.

I'm touched, sweet daughter, for I see
You hold our photos dear.
But, in a chest sans lock-and-key,
To be found out? I fear
That though your Dad can ease your pain,
When past lives are uncovered --
Should this thing happen once again,
Should we three be discovered . . .

They'll be no need for Enforcers,
Sharp of tooth and full of hate;
Down they'll swoop, as fast as coursers
But they'll find that they're too late:
For, should we come under scrutiny,
And my patience mortals try;
Should your partner start to mutiny --

I'll drain Dandy Donny dry!

Justice, Being Blind

by Susan M. Garrett

Chapter 1

He lifted the glass of blood to his lips, sipped at it, then set it to on the workbench. Nick picked up the brush that he'd left it on the table, then walked back to the canvas.

It was wrong. It was too red. Much too red. Blood red.

The light had never been blood red. Not until . . . after.

The picture was perhaps two meters wide and a meter high, an awkward and unorthodox size for a painting. He'd learned long ago to stretch his own canvas, he prepared and worked in odd sizes out of habit. Having gone beyond the rules of the mortal world in so many other ways, this minor act of rebellion was harmless in and of itself. No one would see, no one would care.

But he'd know. And sometimes that made all the difference.

Nick brushed the back of his hand against his forehead wearily -- he'd gone straight to his paints after coming in from work last night. He'd already placed a primer and base coat a few days before. But it was while he was driving around the city last night, trying to pick up information on the murder of a member of a car theft ring, that he'd finally realized what the painting was supposed to be. It had been maddening to force himself to attend to his duties, to pay attention to witnesses who were lying or mistaken, to go over the depressingly sparse facts just one more time in an attempt to find a clue, all the while knowing that the painting was waiting for him.

And then, when he'd run into the loft, tossed his coat and badge and gun to one side, kicked off his shoes and picked up his brush--

It was gone.

The canvas was there. And the paint. And the brush. But the painting that he'd envisioned, the brilliant light he'd known was in there just waiting to be brought to the surface, was gone.

At first he'd simply dabbed in spots of color, hoping to tease it to the surface, bring it to reality. Hours of dabbing had done nothing, so he'd changed brushes and techniques, pushing and pulling the oils across the canvas, digging down to the base coat and pulling up forgotten layers and then burying them with fresh, new paint.

Still, nothing.

There had been no thought for rest, only the need to discover that perfect image that had haunted him in the car. It eluded him, resting just on the periphery of his memory, but he couldn't fix it to the canvas. As the daylight hours passed, he'd found his frustration increasing . . . along with his inability to capture the light.

It was gone.

Nick tossed the brush back to the work bench and picked up the glass of blood. It was time to go back to the station, to try to make some sense of the ways of mortal kind, to apprehend the guilty and let the wheels of justice deal with the details. He had no doubt that the instant he turned on the light and sirens, racing to a murder scene or a crime in progress, he'd know *exactly* what he had to do to capture the light in the painting.

And that it would escape him again the moment he picked up a paintbrush.

The process of cleaning the paint from his skin -- that was one shirt he'd never wear to work again -- and getting ready for work did little to brighten his mood. He hoped it would be a quiet night and he'd be able to spend a good portion of it stuck at his desk, poring over files and filling out paperwork. It would be just enough distraction to give the creative part of his brain a chance to wander and, maybe, to track down that gem of inspiration that had come and gone so quickly the night before.

But by the time Nick arrived at the station, there were more people in the squad room than he'd had ever seen during change of shift. They'd centered themselves on a desk at the far side of the room. Bewildered at the commotion, he leaned against the doorjamb and rubbed his hand along the edge of his chin.

Schanke entered behind him, passing by on his way to his own desk, a cup of coffee in his hands. He gestured toward the back of Nick's hand. "What's that?"

Turning his hand over, he saw the spots of red and blue paint that still lingered, just to one side of his knuckle. Self-conscious, he rubbed the spot with his free hand and grinned. "Must've missed that. Spent most of the day on a painting."

"Strike while the inspiration's hot, huh?" asked Schanke, continuing the few steps to his desk. Setting down the coffee, he looked up again. "It's nice to know Mister 'fresh-from-the-dry-cleaner' misses a spot now and again."

"What gives?"

Looking up, Schanke followed his gesture to the people crowded around the desk at the other side of the room, their conversation rising and falling in sporadic waves. "Vacation schedule." He paused, looked at Nick curiously, then smiled and snapped his fingers. "That's right, you usually don't get to see the feeding frenzy. Downtown sent up the schedule later than usual this year."

Nick stared at him in disbelief. "That's what this mob scene's about? Vacation assignments?"

"You should have seen it an hour ago. I thought Bertha from Central Accounting was gonna take out that new kid who transferred in from Metro Downtown. Something about her nephew's cello recital." He shrugged and lifted the coffee from his desk, taking a sip. "You gonna get in there?"

"I think I'll wait till it's down to a dull roar," said Nick, after a moment's hesitation. "I usually fill in what's left."

"You can afford to." Schanke sighed. "Myra's got it into her head that we're spending a week at her sister's this year. It's like planning the invasion of Normandy all over again."

Nick grinned. "Can't be that bad."

"You haven't met Myra's sister -- she makes General Patton look like a conscientious objector." He

nodded as Nick winced. "Yeah. I met her before the wedding and *still* married Myra. You wanna talk about true love."

"You don't look like a man who's about to go one-on-one with a Sherman tank."

"Between seniority and a little quick elbow work," Schanke mimed a thrust to one side with his elbow, "I got the week Myra wanted. You know, you've got a couple years under your belt, now -- you should get in there and grab a three day weekend or something. You deserve a day in the sun, instead of taking left-overs all the time. It's only fair." He looked up suddenly, through the squad room door to the front desk. "Uh-oh, donut delivery." Schanke cast a quick look at the mob still huddled around the vacation schedule. "Won't be a cruller standing if they get wind of it. Better make my move now. You want anything?"

Nick shook his head, dismissing the question with a wave of his hand. "No thanks. I--"

"Why do I even ask?" Schanke rolled his eyes heavenward, then gave his partner a grin as he returned the coffee cup to his desk. "Just cover my back, okay?"

"You got it." Chuckling under his breath, Nick watched Schanke dash to the donut boxes that had just been delivered at the front desk, but his attention returned almost immediately to the crowd gathered around the vacation schedule. It was beginning to thin, uniforms and civilian personnel drifting away with either grins of triumph or disheartened expressions.

He took a step closer to the melee, peering over the shoulders, catching wisps of conversation as last minute deals were made, days traded and favors granted or owed. Maybe he *did* deserve a day in the sun, as Schanke had said.

But for a moment, all he could see was a memory of his fingers straining across a wood planked floor, trying to grasp the square of light that shone in from a window, just beyond his reach . . .

Someone ran into him. He was aware, at first, only of a number of notebooks and sheets of paper flying through the air. "I'm sorry, Detective Knight! I wasn't watching where I was going and the Captain said he wanted this ASAP--"

The voice and face were familiar -- Kevin Seeley was one of the part-time sketch artists they employed when they needed a witness description turned into a picture from which they could ID a suspect. Nick knelt down on the floor and started gathering up the notebooks and paper. "No harm done. And that's 'Nick,' okay?"

"Nick." The young man looked up at him with a shamefaced grin. "It's all over the place, isn't it?" He glanced anxiously down at the stuff gathered around him, then at the door to Stonetree's office.

"Go," prompted Nick. "I'll clean this up." He gestured toward the mess with a sweep of his hand, then added, "Go on!" when Seeley hesitated.

Grabbing up a few pieces of paper and a drawing board, Seeley muttered a quick, "Thanks," then continued at a run to Stonetree's office.

There was paper everywhere. Nick collected a handful, not really seeing what he was picking up, until a sketch of a young black woman caught his eye. Leaning back on his knees, he held the pencil piece to

the light and looked at it.

It had been done in light leads and the clarity of detail and line were excellent. If this was Seeley's, he'd managed to capture not only a proportionate likeness, but a quality of character and spirit. The woman's smile was both engaging and enchanting.

That's when he realized that the notebooks were actually sketchbooks. And the papers that had been scattered across the floor were covered with everything from doodles, to sketches, to finished drawings. He took more care, then, as he picked up the papers and shuffled them into a neat pile, grimacing at the creasing in some that he'd grabbed in haste when they'd first fallen.

They weren't perfect. Nor were they particularly expert. But Nick found himself taking more time with each new drawing, each new discovery, searching out the curve of a line, or the flow of a shaded shadow. There was more grace and beauty in these few rough sketches than he'd seen in his many years of traveling both time and territory. There was a quality of life in them that he found amazing, stunning. And each new picture was another breath.

It was only a matter of a few minutes before he rose, artwork in hand, still trying to grasp, figuratively and literally, this sudden discovery. It was then that Seeley returned with his drawing board. For a moment, Nick couldn't quite reconcile the talent evident in the drawings with the very ordinary young man with whom he'd briefly chatted upon occasion. But it was Seeley's glance back over his shoulder that gave him an opening.

"The burglary or the auto theft?" asked Nick, inclining his head toward Stonetree's office.

"Auto theft. We lucked out. Car was parked under a streetlight, witness has twenty-twenty vision, and she got a good look at him through an open window--no glare." Seeley smiled broadly. "Those don't come along too often."

"Can I see it?"

Seeley flipped over the clipboard.

Nick took a look at the features, his memory sealing them in time and place -- if he ever came across this particular car thief, he'd be able to identify him in the blink of an eye. Then, he took another look at the picture, using a criteria of judgment that had less to do with crime than culture. Even here, in the sketch of a suspect, he could see something that presaged not what Seeley was, but what he would become. "Nice tonal balance."

"For a perp ID?" Seeley flipped the clipboard around and held it at arm's length in surprise. He grimaced at it. "I guess. Thanks."

"You got a minute?" asked Nick, reluctant to hand back the sketches Seeley reached for.

"Now that the boss has his picture, yeah."

Nick walked over to his desk and sat down, placing the stack of sketches and sketchbooks on his blotter. Gesturing for Seeley to lean over his shoulder, he pointed toward a watercolor sketch in one of the open notebooks. "This is good."

"It's wrong," said Seeley, frowning. "I just can't put my finger on it--"

"The perspective's off here." Nick indicated the keel of the sailboat in the picture, tracing his finger just along the edge. He looked up and saw Seeley's dark eyes narrow as he leaned in, staring at the picture.

Then he smiled ruefully. "Yeah. Now I see it. Thanks. That's been bugging the hell out of me. Couldn't figure out why, though. Guess you just need another eye to take a look, now and again."

"It's not important," said Nick, dismissing the error. "What's right about it is this -- and this." He traced the light glinting from the waves and the reflection off the bright hull of the boat. "You did this down at the harbor?"

"Yeah. Got a few hours between classes on Tuesday and Thursday. Nice days it's a great place to sketch. Paint, if I'm able."

Nick tapped the sketchbooks with his hand and looked up at Seeley. "Can I take a look?"

Seeley shrugged and took a step back. "Sure. I don't want to bother you --"

"Believe me, it's my pleasure." After carefully going through the single sketches, Nick then turned his attention to the notebooks. They were filled with partial landscapes, character sketches, bits of light and shadow, just about everything in the city that surrounded them, from the architecture, to the faces of the denizens of the park, to the traffic on Younge Street.

He made comments as he flipped through, pointing out errors or complimenting Seeley on the use of tone or line or color. The artist hadn't perfected technique yet, but he had the eye and an ability to capture place, tone, and character in a few simple lines. It was amazing, fascinating . . .

And more than a little surprising. Nick frowned grimly as he realized that he'd met Seeley over a year ago, had even sat in on sessions when the artist had been asked to transfer a witness' description of a suspect, but had never suspected the young man had such talent, such life in his work. He'd studied enough over the centuries to recognize a gift when he saw it. And although Seeley hadn't yet mastered his art, he would . . . and soon.

It was the light, the light that he'd been trying to capture. Seeley hadn't only found the light and fixed it to the page, but had made it work for him. In each piece it was different -- subtle in some and bold in others -- but there was a brightness and intensity of which he could only dream. And Seeley used it like a plaything or a tool whose contours and curves had been molded to fit the shape of his creative mind.

Again and again, Nick kept flipping back to the watercolor sketch of the sailboat. When he'd finished browsing through the last of the sketchbooks, he left that one open to the picture and reached into his jacket for his wallet. "Can I buy this one from you?"

Seeley seemed stunned. He stared down at the piece then back at Nick, who had his wallet in hand. "It's just a sketch. And, like you said, the perspective's off --"

Schanke returned, with two donuts. Dropping them to his desk, he said, "Hi, Kevin. That auto theft done?"

"Picture's in the Captain's office," said Seeley, straightening slightly. "But I've got a photocopy." He handed the clipboard to Schanke.

"I'm serious," pressed Nick, gesturing down at the watercolor. "I'd like to buy it from you."

Schanke rose slightly from his chair and looked over at Nick's blotter. "Oh -- must be one of those artist-to-artist things. Nice boat. Belong to anyone I know?"

Seeley hesitated at Schanke's comment, then looked back at Nick, eyes wide. "You draw?"

"Paint." With a grin and a sense of absurdity, he flipped over his hand and showed Seeley the spot of color his wash-up hadn't managed to dislodge. "Oils. Abstracts, mostly."

"You should see his loft," commented Schanke. "Real *art*. Huge, really huge-big things. In color."

"Canvases," corrected Nick.

"I'd like to see them sometime," said Seeley.

Now it was Nick's turn to hesitate, remembering that painting in his loft that was only begun and yet over done. He had some art in him, but nothing like *this* . . . Looking down at the watercolor sketch, he mumbled, "They're not much--"

"No, really. Here--" Seeley picked up the notebook and carefully removed the sketch, which he handed to Nick. "We'll trade. You can have this . . . if you'll let me run through your work some time."

"I'm getting the better end of the deal," warned Nick. But, as he looked down at the sketch in his hand, his chest glowed with a feeling not unlike pride -- someone actually wanted to see *his* work. "We'll set up something -- an evening next week sound good?"

"Perfect." Seeley reached past him and picked up his sketches and books from the table. "Thanks for the encouragement." Leaning over Nick's desk, he took the clipboard from Schanke. "Better get this down to dispatch."

"Sure. Good job on that, by the way," said Schanke.

Seeley grinned, then nodded at Nick. "Next week?"

"Right." Nick turned to watch Seeley leave, then his attention returned to the sketch in his hands. There was so much light in it! In comparison, the abstract he'd spent his daylight hours agonizing over had less life than a child's finger-painting.

"Good kid," said Schanke.

"Talented kid," corrected Nick. So much light . . .

"Is that going to be worth something, someday?"

"It's worth something now."

"How much?"

With a frustrated sigh, Nick leaned back in his chair, letting the sketch fall gently to his desk blotter. "Why does it always have to come down to money? If it speaks to you, means something to you, then it's worth something. You have no appreciation for art."

"I do, too," protested Schanke.

They both looked up as bedlam erupted at the front desk. A vice cop entered, two hookers in tow. The women were protesting more than vehemently about their indisputable innocence.

Schanke grinned and pointed. "Now *that's* art." He rose from behind his desk, and straightened his tie.

But as he passed Nick's desk and headed out of the squad room, Nick picked up a file folder and slapped it against Schanke's chest. "We've got work to do. That auto-theft ring?"

"Oh, yeah. Right." With a sigh and a disappointed frown, Schanke returned to his desk, clutching the file. "But where do you go when your lead suspect's been iced?"

"Back to square one," said Nick. Echoing Schanke's frown, he looked down at the files on his blotter, but the watercolor again caught his eye.

Back to square one. Back to the light . . .

Candle wax dripped down upon the parchment he was reading. Nicholas swept his hand through the blob of hot wax, ignoring the momentary flash of heat against his skin. Clarity was important-- the momentary pain of a burn couldn't stop him, *wouldn't* stop him from his studies this night, especially if what he suspected might be true.

The line of Latin ended in mid-sentence. He looked up, distracted, then down the massive oak table that he'd covered with parchment, maps, and charts during his work of the past three weeks. It was here somewhere. He'd purchased the whole of Georg Faust's discourses on the alignment of the heavens and their effect on mortal and immortal affairs. True, the man's reasoning was faulty, his Latin corrupt, but his ideas were nothing short of inspiring.

Nicholas along walked the length of the table, reaching for likely parchments at random, reading them, then tossing them to the floor in his haste to continue his train of thought. The long, fur-trimmed robe he wore over his shirt and hose brushed other papers and maps from the table, as did the sleeves of the gown, but he paid no attention to the fallen items. Feverishly, he continued his search.

And, just as he'd decided that he'd been cheated, that the document merchant had held back the final pages of the rare script in the hope of extorting more money from him, he found the page he sought. Raising it to the air, he brought it to his lips and kissed it, then threw himself into one of the heavy, high-backed wooden chairs and ran his finger down the line as he read.

Each word gave him hope, each sentence led his smile to broaden. Within minutes, he discovered that his initial suspicion had been correct -- it *was* today. Or, rather, this next dawn.

The candle flame flickered and he looked up, more concerned for the well-being of his parchment than the loss of the light.

Janette stood in the open door, a trace of red upon her lips. The wan light of the candle set aglow the gold threads in her gown and the cowl formed of small metal links that held her braided hair from her face and neck. Her skin was pale and fairer than the snow that covered the sleepy German *Stadt* where they'd found lodging, while LaCroix played his political games. The sleeves of her gown were puffed and cut and slashed and tied with so many ribbons he knew it took her well over an hour to fasten them all. But

if she chose to keep up with the ways of fashion, it was her right to spend as much time as she liked. For the moment, he was content to watch her beauty glide toward him through the darkness.

And come the dawn, he would see her in the light for the first time.

She was frowning as she waved her hand at the paper scattered about the floor and the table. "What a mess."

Nicholas swung his leg idly against the arm of the chair, sitting sideways despite the discomfort. "It doesn't matter."

"It *does*. You know LaCroix likes things tidy. And you--" Janette walked around him, running her hand along the length of his beard and the side of his neck lightly as she passed him. "You haven't shaved for days. And I very much doubt you've dressed properly for weeks -- I haven't seen you in your coat and breeches for at least that long."

"I've been busy searching for this." He brandished the parchment at her, with as much joy as if he held the formula for the Philosopher's Stone or the universal solvent in his hand.

She cast an anxious look at him over her shoulder. "And have you fed, recently?" When his only answer was to rise to his feet and walk to the table, she moved to his side quickly, catching his arm. "Nicola, you *must* feed. You'll starve yourself if you continue this way. Leave your studies for an hour and come with me. There are many at the tavern and the hour is late. They'll be returning home soon. Such easy prey and their blood thick and strong with brown ale."

Her words sent a thin knife of hunger through his innards. Nicholas grabbed the edges of the table, the parchment crumpling beneath his fingers, to keep himself from falling to the floor. She was right, he'd neglected his feeding. But what did it matter, what *could* it matter, when he'd found part of the answer?

Making a sound of disgust, Janette reached beneath his hand and removed the parchment. She scanned it quickly, then tossed it to one side of the table. "Nonsense," she told him.

Nicholas darted forward as the paper sailed too close to the flame of the candle for his comfort. He caught it just in time. "It's not nonsense. It's fact," he told her, carefully smoothing out the paper with the flat of his hand.

"It's astrology."

"Alchemy," he corrected.

"Does it matter?" Janette gestured disdainfully toward another parchment, covered with alchemical symbols. "It's nonsense and it's always been nonsense, meant to comfort the fearful hearts of young women and old maidens, promise them bright futures with strong, handsome husbands and sound children. While the truth of it is they end up chained to doddering *Burgermeisters*, die wailing in childbirth, or end up as cowering fishmongers, on the docks." The hard lines of her face softened when he looked at her reproachfully and she leaned her weight against him. "Nicola, this is only a party trick, nothing more. Let it be and come hunt with me."

He placed his hand over hers and stared past the flame of the candle, into the darkness. Did he dare tell her what he hoped to be true?

When he looked in her eyes, saw the concern there, he could do nothing less but give her what was in his heart. Taking her hand between his, he grinned. "I'll hunt with you," he promised. But, as a pleased smile stole across her lips, he added, "Come the dawn."

The words startled her and storm clouds arose in the depths of her blue eyes. Angrily, she pulled her hand from his and stalked away, lifting her skirts as she walked. "Don't mock me, Nicola. I have no wish to burn in the sunlight."

"You won't," he promised, stealing behind her. He placed his arms around her waist and planted a kiss on her cheek. "Nor will I."

She turned her head, no doubt surprised at the certainty in his tone. He nodded, saying, "That's what I've been doing. This Faust made a study of the skies and immortal things. He discovered there are times when the sun can't harm us. Janette, we *can* walk in the light, if only for a day, every few centuries."

Her hand trembled as it closed over the one he held at her waist. "No, that can't be. I've seen the sun disappear at midday, certainly . . . for a short time we're safe, but only that short time. It returns and burns again."

"This is different," he promised, holding her close. "I don't understand it myself -- Faust claims it has something to do with a balance of the elements -- but from dawn until dusk, we may walk in the light. And this dawn, this day, is the one."

Janette pulled away from him -- there was fear in her eyes. "You can't mean to try this?"

"Why not? His calculations appear correct," he waved toward the documents on the table. "The day won't come again for centuries. It's by accident that I discovered it now and pure luck that I managed to decipher the date in time." Again, he walked toward her, smiling. "We can walk in the light." Nicholas took his hands in hers and raised them to his lips. "Do you know, I've never seen you in sunlight. How beautiful you must be."

Her smile was weak, forced. Again, she turned away. "You must not think of this. You must not do this. You will burn, Nicola. And I would not have that happen."

"You can't stop me," he warned her.

Janette turned toward him. "LaCroix will, when I tell him."

"So -- go tell him," he mocked, gesturing with his hand toward the doorway. "Run off and tell your master, if you can find him."

With an angry flourish, Janette gathered her skirts in her hand and hurried toward the door. "I *will* tell him. And he *will* stop you."

It was only a matter of thought to be at the door before her. He leaned against the closed door, arms crossed. "I *will* walk in the light, tomorrow," he promised. "Not even LaCroix will stop me."

Janette raised her chin defiantly. "We shall see. Now, let me pass."

He stood his ground for a moment, but only for a moment, then opened the door, laughing. With an oath,

she scurried out of the room and into the darkness of the rest of the house. Still chuckling lightly, Nicholas closed the door behind her and leaned against it -- heavily for a moment.

He raised a hand to his forehead as the room spun and the candle flame wavered -- but not of its own accord -- then closed his eyes until the weakness passed. Janette was right in that he hadn't fed for several days. The hunger was starting to weaken him. But . . . to walk in the light, if only for a day, was worth any brief weakness.

Opening his eyes, he caught sight of the papers on the table and stumbled across the room. They rustled intriguingly beneath his hands, but he gathered them together for later review. Who knew what other secrets Faust's studies contained -- perhaps even a cure for the dread fate with which he'd been afflicted?

It would take time, he knew. He'd have to accept that. But as he carefully slipped the papers back into the hide pouch in which they'd arrived, he couldn't stop himself from grinning. It would begin with a walk in the light. And then . . . who knew where it could lead?

Chapter 2

"Schanke! Knight!" The captain's unprecedented speed in crossing the room and a frown more severe than usual meant that something was up.

Nick was on his feet and reaching for his jacket as Stonetree explained, "Hostage situation in progress, Adelaide West and Bay. We've got one car on the scene, four in transit. One confirmed death."

"How many hostages?" asked Schanke, shrugging into his own jacket.

"At least three. Two suspects, but--"

"Could be more," Nick finished, automatically. "We're on it."

"I want an on-scene report, pronto," called Stonetree, following them to the doors of the station. "No heroics -- Downtown has a negotiator in transit. Just get the situation stable."

"Will do, Captain." Nick tossed the comment over his shoulder, then hit the front door, Schanke behind him. They ran for the Caddy. Before the engine had started, Schanke had already pulled the light from the glove compartment and set it flashing.

"Five minutes?" asked Nick, pulling the car out of the lot and onto the street.

"If we run the reds." Schanke had the radio mike in his hand. "Eighty-one Kilo to dispatch, Eighty-one Kilo to dispatch, in transit to Adelaide West and Bay. What's the situation update? Copy?"

Nick had half his attention on the radio, the other half on the road, as he steered the Caddy through traffic.

"Eighty-one Kilo, this is Fifty-two Charlie, on scene. Copy?"

"Go ahead, Fifty-two," said Schanke.

"Eighty-one, we've got four confirmed live hostages, one dead. Two confirmed suspects in a dry-cleaners,

handguns, no ID as yet. Looks like an armed robbery gone bad--"

The sound of gunshots cut off the rest of the officer's sentence. Nick met Schanke's eyes, as Schanke said, "Fifty-two? We heard gunfire. Copy?"

They waited and Nick found himself holding his breath, his fingers tightening around the steering wheel as he swerved through on-coming traffic. The seconds seemed like minutes, but then the reply sputtered through the radio.

"Dispatch -- this is Fifty-two Charlie. Hostage situation update -- one suspect down, I repeat, down. No sign of other suspect. Copy?"

"Ten-Four, Fifty-two," answered the radio dispatcher. "You want a Code Four on that?"

"Copy on the Code Four, Dispatch. Cancel any new calls, but we'll take anyone in transit. Downgrade to a Code One."

With a sigh, Schanke reached over to the dashboard and flicked off the light and siren according to the downgrade order, then replaced it in the glove compartment. "Guess we missed all the fun."

"If you can call it that." Nick eased his foot from the accelerator, slowing the car to a respectable speed as the radio continued to blurt messages. Ambulances were called for. A Crime Scene Unit was diverted in transit from another location.

When they arrived, traffic on Bay was down to one lane. The street immediately in front of the dry cleaners was a frenzy of organized confusion. There were two ambulances on scene and, as Nick exited the Caddy and crossed the street, he heard the siren of an approaching third. Distantly, he made note of at least one car from the Coroner's Office, then spotted a second.

Schanke walked beside him, his notebook already in hand. They paused as they reached a body on the sidewalk. Someone from CSU was drawing the chalk line to mark the position of the corpse. Nick squatted down for a moment, noting the several bullet wounds, then rose to his feet and took a few steps away. He closed his eyes, pushing back the blood hunger that ran through him -- despite the fact that he'd fed earlier, it never really went away.

"This our suspect?" Schanke asked one of the uniformed officers.

"Yes sir. Don't know if he was high or what, but he came charging out the front door and started firing."

Nick opened his eyes and took a deep breath. He turned and gave the officer a grim smile, but didn't look down at the corpse again. "What about the second suspect?"

The Officer licked his lips. "Must have gotten out the back. We missed him, completely. Couldn't get too close, with the hostages inside. Not that it mattered."

Schanke took a deep breath and met Nick's eyes. "Dead?"

"Three of 'em." The man nodded toward a sheet covered corpse being carried to an ambulance. "Got one female and one male still breathing."

Schanke tapped his pen against his teeth and made a notation in his notebook. "See if you can get me ID's

on any of the hostages, okay -- personal effects. Any other witnesses?"

"Only the people inside. No security cameras. Nobody saw them go in and there's nothing but a blind alley out back."

Nick nodded toward the officer. "Thanks."

The officer moved away, toward the medical personnel. Schanke looked down at the body, then at the crowd growing against the police barricade in the street. "Even money says neither one of them's local."

"How do you figure that?"

"They were looking for quick cash. Any local'd know a place like this wouldn't have that kind of cash on a Monday." Schanke walked to the door of the dry cleaners and held it open. "Bank opened this morning--"

"Which means the weekend receipts were already gone."

"And who the hell picks up dry-cleaning on a Monday?"

Nick gave him a light smile. "I do."

Schanke stopped just inside the door and stared at him. "Do not."

"Pick it up whenever it's ready."

"You're weird, you know that?" Schanke walked over to the counter. "Myra uses our cleaner's like an extra closet -- just leaves it there till she needs something, then has me pick it up. I end up doing bulk runs after payday."

Nick turned around, looking at the ceiling and the walls. "He's right -- no cameras. This one's gonna be a tough one to find."

"Maybe we'll luck out with an ID on the stiff out front. Known associates."

"Maybe." Nick walked past the counter into the area behind the dry cleaning machines and front racks. He could hear the CSU at work in the rear of the place and took care not to touch anything until he could get gloved. "Hostages were back here?"

"Looks right," said Schanke, following him. He wrinkled his nose. "What the hell's that smell?"

They made their way through the various suits, jackets, drapes, and dresses hanging from the revolving racks, the plastic rustling as they brushed against it. One of the CSU staff pushed past them, headed at a run for the front of the store, but they continued on.

There was a clear area at the back, with a few sewing machines, desks, ironing board, and two doors -- one that looked like it led to a washroom and another heavier door through which the night air entered. A uniformed officer stood just inside the outer door, which Nick pointed out to Schanke. "That's where he went."

Schanke nodded, he was holding his nose closed with two fingers. "Maybe I'll just check that out," he

said, a decidedly green tint to his face. "Think I need some air."

Nick fought back a grin as Schanke ran for the door, but changed his mind as a fresh breeze lifted the noxious scent again. The CSU people seemed unaffected, as they knelt beside the two bodies that had yet to be removed, taking photographs and picking up stray bits of evidence with tweezers or gloves and bagging it for later identification.

Just then, Natalie walked out of the rest room, pulling protective gloves from her hands. She said, "Hi," as she spotted him, then looked around. "Where's Schanke?"

"Getting some air."

"I don't blame him. The smell of vomit can do that to some people." She took a breath and held it a second, then said in a tight voice, "Can we talk outside?"

Smiling, Nick placed his arm on her shoulder and led her toward the door. He wasn't about to tell her that he'd smelled worse in his time -- the stench of sun-baked, rotting corpses from a battlefield coming immediately to mind. He had a feeling it wouldn't help.

Natalie looked a little less green when she hit the fresh air.

"Better?" he asked, watching her carefully.

She gave him a weak smile. "Yeah. I can usually handle stuff like that, but between the vomit and the ammonia--"

"Ammonia?"

She hesitated. "You just got here?"

"Just walked in. We heard the shooting in transit."

"Okay. We happened to be in the neighborhood -- picking up a floater. Dispatch diverted us here." Natalie gestured over her shoulder, toward the dry cleaners. "Remind me to send them a thank you."

"That bad?"

"That bad. Got a couple of sickos here, Nick. From what I gather, they tried to rob the place, then decided they didn't want any witnesses."

He looked toward the open door. "Employees?"

"Three. The other two were customers." Her lips were set in a grim line. "But I guess they were afraid somebody would hear the gunshots, because they decided to try something quieter." She looked down at the ground and shook her head, as if not quite believing her own words. "They force fed them anything they could get their hands on -- dry cleaning fluid, drain opener, ammonia, chlorine bleach--"

Nick winced at the list. "Yeah, I know enough chemistry to figure that out."

"There's a reason it says 'avoid contact with skin,'" she said, the barest tremor to her voice. "But you pour that inside somebody . . . the only reason two of them survived is they managed to vomit up most

of the stuff in time."

He took a step or two away from her, then looked down the mouth of the alley. "What are their chances?"

"Not good. I saw them on the way out -- I don't think the woman'll make it through the night. The man--" When she hesitated, he looked back at her and she shrugged, "Looks like he fought back. From what I saw, they poured the stuff in his eyes first to keep him busy."

Schanke was coming back up the alley, the uniformed officer from the front of the building with him.

"Any luck?" called Nick.

Schanke shook his head, gesturing toward the solid brick walls around them. "Nobody saw anything. The guy's gone."

"You've gotta get this one, Nick," Natalie said softly, "and fast. That wasn't just murder -- it was torture."

"It gets worse." Schanke's voice mirrored his expression -- cold and angry. He tapped his notebook against his hand, then passed it to Nick. "Officer Ross here just gave me a list of the hostages. Don't know which ones are living or dead as of yet."

He'd been with Schanke long enough to read the man's scrawl. The first three names meant nothing to him. But the fourth-- "Shit."

Natalie backed up a step at his exclamation. "What?"

"One of our own," explained Schanke. "Might have met him -- Kevin Seeley? One of the part-time sketch artists we've been using, since they cut the budget. Went to school, I think. Nice kid."

She looked up at Nick, but he couldn't meet her eyes. Something inside him turned cold and hard as he handed the notebook back to Schanke. So much light

"Tall, black kid, right?" asked Natalie.

For a moment, he had hope. He took a breath and nodded, eyeing her cautiously. "Yeah."

"He's alive."

"Hallelujah," whispered Schanke, the barest of smiles on his lips. "Chalk one up for our side."

Shaking his head, Nick closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he headed through the back door and into the store, not having the heart to explain. There was a darkness inside him, an old, cold place. Seeing Seeley's sketches, seeing the light in them, had kept it at bay. But now . . .

Behind him, he heard Schanke ask, "What? What did I say wrong?"

"He was a sketch artist?" asked Natalie.

"Yeah -- a *real* artist. You shoulda seen the picture he gave Nick. Half the stuff in the ROM couldn't stand up to--"

Nick hurried ahead, not wanting to hear the words. If he didn't hear the words, it wouldn't be true. The light was still there. It *had* to be. To lose it just when he'd found it again . . .

But even with the distance between them, the plastic-covered clothing whispering as he made his way to the front of the store, Natalie's voice reached his sensitive hearing.

"He probably won't make it through the night. And even if he does -- they blinded him."

Closing his eyes again wouldn't work -- all he could see was the picture of the sailboat on the water, the light glinting off the waves and the hull in brilliant streaks of white and gold. So much light . . .

Gone. Forever.

Chapter 3

The fury hadn't quite left him by the time he returned to the loft. Nick tore off his jacket and threw it onto the couch, then headed for the refrigerator. At first, burrowing into the work at hand had helped. There were witnesses to be questioned, statements to be taken, reports to fill out -- very normal, ordinary things that occurred when horrific events happened to other people.

But this time it was someone he knew. Or had wanted to know. To have accidentally discovered Kevin Seeley's talent and then to have that presence and promise wrenched away was almost a personal affront. Nick knew no matter how long he lived, he'd never produce work near the caliber of which Kevin Seeley would be capable-- would have *been* capable-- of producing. It would have been enough to have watched him for a time, help him if he could. To learn what was learnable by simple observation. And to bask in that wonderful light for as long as it lasted . . .

It was gone too soon. Once again, the light had been taken from him.

He pulled a bottle from the refrigerator, removed the cork from the lip with his teeth, then spat the cork into his hand and touched the bottle to his lips. The blood was cold and thick -- there wasn't any light in it, either. It was a dark drink, but it suited his dark mood.

Nick wandered back to his work area, kicking off his shoes, not really caring where they landed. The district station had been in a state of controlled anguish by the time they'd returned from the crime scene -- he'd seen it too often in the past few years. When a fellow cop had been injured or killed, the 'family' -- as Stonetree referred to the law enforcement community -- grieved. To a civilian entering the station, everything would seem professional, normal. But anyone who worked with the force could feel the underlying tension of not knowing, the frustration at not being able to do anything. All too often, the feelings dissolved into grief, as one of their own was taken into the darkness without warning. For now, there was only the waiting, as officers stayed past their shift to man phone lines to the hospital, hoping for any word.

The waiting was the worst.

He found himself staring at the picture he'd painted -- had *tried* to paint -- and winced. Raising the bottle of blood to his lips, Nick drank and turned away from the picture. Not even the blood would feed that cold, hollow space inside. The painting over which he'd agonized, which he'd envisioned as filled with

light, was nothing but a void. There was color and motion, but it was cold and empty in a way that none of Kevin Seeley's work had been or, he imagined, would ever be.

Could ever have been.

That thought brought him up short. Setting the bottle aside, he walked over to the painting and stared at it. There was a part of him that had rejoiced upon seeing Kevin's work, had gloried in the light and life. And, if truth be told, there was also a part of him that had been wounded by the light, by the presence of something better, greater than the small talent he'd honed over the centuries. When Kevin had asked to see his work he'd been flattered . . . and afraid.

Leaning forward, Nick ran his finger through the paint spread across the canvas, gouging the layers of oil he'd spread in fits and starts throughout the day. What would Kevin had thought of him, of his work? Would Kevin, who'd seen the light in everything, have managed to see some shred of dormant light in this dark monstrosity? Or in any of the other pieces he'd painted?

He turned, surveying his walls, studying the few of his pieces that had met with his approval enough to be placed on display. They were his successes, because they'd come closest to his ideal, to the light. But now they seemed dark, blacker than night, without soul and without life. What would Kevin have thought of them? What would Kevin had seen?

Past tense. So much of his life was in the past tense.

As was the light. Not here. Not going. But *gone*.

Whatever energy was left to him seemed to dissipate. Wearily, Nick picked up the bottle and headed toward the stairs to the upper floor, hoping to lose himself in sleep. He had enough presence of mind to pick up his jacket from the couch, then paused as a rolled piece of paper, fastened with a rubberband, fell out of his inside pocket. Leaning down to pick it up, he realized that it was the picture Kevin had given him, the watercolor of the boats on the water.

With something akin to reverence, Nick reached down and rescued the picture from the floor. He slid the rubberband from it carefully as he walked back to the living room. Once he reached the table, he unrolled it carefully, setting a small figure on either end to help flatten it again. It wouldn't take much to fix it, he'd been careful in carrying it home. How had he forgotten that he'd had it with him?

But then the crest of the keel coming out of the water caught his eyes. The light blazed within the picture and he stared at it, enraptured again. How easy it was to become lost in darkness, to forget the light . . .

When he turned and headed upstairs, he left the bottle of blood behind. And he hoped that for this night at least his dreams might be filled with the gleam of light from glossed wood and unfurled sails, instead of the cold emptiness that he'd come to expect and accept after so many centuries in darkness.

He knew the dawn was fast approaching just as he'd always known . . . or so it seemed. As Nicholas trimmed his beard, found himself a freshly laundered tunic, and fastened what seemed to be an unending series of ties and laces on his breeches, then his coat, there was a slight tremor within him, a warning. It grew as did the nearness of the dawn, of the light -- grew in strength and urgency until it should have been all he could think about. His eyes kept glancing back toward the windows, which were shuttered as a matter of course against the cold of the winter night and kept prying mortal eyes away.

He knew the room would be dark enough in which to spend the daylight hours, protected from the burning

rays of the sun. He'd spent much of the last three weeks here, lost in study, barely aware of the passing of darkness into light as he shuffled through the parchments and papers of Georg Faust. Only that inner sense reminded him of the danger of approaching brightness, or promised the sweet safety of the impending twilight. And he'd ignored even that, as he'd pondered his translations, studied the charts and sigils and aspects, refigured the calculations. While in this safe place, the transience of day and night hadn't mattered. Until he'd found the answer he'd sought.

Leaving the last lace of his slashed coat undone -- for he was no slave to fashion as was Janette -- he walked back to the table. Nicholas picked up the pouch that contained Faust's papers and measured the weight of it in his hands. If Faust were correct, the coming dawn would hold no threat for him, or his kind. He would walk in the light, if only for this day.

And then, there were other secrets that might be learned from Faust's studies. If he should survive this dawn, not burn in the light . . . ?

A door banged shut not too far away. Nicholas looked up, letting the pouch fall to the table. The sound was unmistakable, as was the tread of feet on the wooden floor of the house, the hushed voices that he could recognize but were too distant in which to find meaning.

LaCroix had returned. Janette had found him and brought him here.

For an instant, there was a part of him that felt fear and his hands fell back to the tied pouch that rested on the table. LaCroix would try to stop him, he was certain of it. But LaCroix was reasonable, rational, in a way which Janette was not. Her fear of the light wouldn't be swayed by calculations or predictions. But LaCroix was another matter. He would hear, he would understand.

Nicholas had almost convinced himself that he'd have the right of it, that he could adequately explain his studies to LaCroix, that there'd be nothing to keep him from this adventure. But when the door opened inward and LaCroix stalked into the low beamed room, ducking his head as he entered, the small bit of fear blossomed again, near his heart.

The sleeves on LaCroix's coat were flounced, Nicholas could see the tips of leather gloves peeking out from the pockets sewn on the side. Those same gloves fell out of their resting places as LaCroix began to unlace his coat, glancing up at Nicholas with a look of . . . surprise?

"I'd have thought you'd be at rest by now," LaCroix said lightly. He tugged on the lacings methodically and, as in all things that LaCroix wished, they slid loose easily, without knotting. He tossed his coat over a high-backed chair and stretched. "I thought they'd keep me there all morning through-- I don't trust this Augsburg, Nicholas. You should come with me tomorrow night. I'd like your opinion on him. And his intentions."

The words were meant to flatter him -- LaCroix seldom asked his opinion in matters of politics, for which he had neither aptitude or interest, save for judging the readiness and capabilities of armies and their generals. Nicholas was about to say as much, but he caught a glimpse of movement at the door; Janette was hovering in the hallway outside, watching and listening. He could hear the nervous pace of her footsteps.

"Well?" asked LaCroix.

He fixed his eyes on the doorway. "She brought you back here."

"Hmn? Janette?" LaCroix glanced over his shoulder, toward the door, still maintaining that facade of disinterest. "Why, yes." He settled in the chair over which he'd thrown his coat and steeped his fingers. "She's concerned about you, says you haven't fed for days."

"And you said?" Finally, he looked at LaCroix, met his gaze.

But LaCroix's expression was still even, unconcerned. "Only that it was late and time we returned here. Have you, by the way? Fed?" He looked down at his fingernails. "Of course, it's none of my concern if you should decide to fast for a time. But it *will* be temporary, Nicholas. I shouldn't like to see you starve. I have my reputation to protect."

This time, those cold eyes fixed on him, challenging him to answer sharply, or smartly, or nastily. And Nicholas looked away, to the stub of the candle which was afloat in the small bowl of melted wax. "I've been busy."

"So Janette said. Some nonsense about walking in the light."

"It's true," muttered Nicholas, still staring at the candle, memorizing the way the light flickered and danced.

LaCroix leaned forward. "I beg your pardon -- what was that?"

"You heard well enough." Watching the light, seeing it, gave him some courage. He met LaCroix's gaze. "It's true. When the sun rises, we can walk in the light."

Lips tightening into a thin smile, LaCroix settled back in the chair again and shook his head. "And how is this miracle supposed to be accomplished?"

He picked up the parcel that contained Faust's papers -- but stopped himself, as he stared into LaCroix's eyes. His first reaction was to explain, to share this mystery he'd uncovered. LaCroix *would* understand, as he had understood.

But Nicholas froze when he saw that steel in LaCroix's eyes. Before having been heard, his argument had been judged faulty and dismissed. Not matter what he said or how he said it, if he should be as eloquent as Cicero -- whom LaCroix loved to quote -- he'd have no hearing in this court. The matter had been decided. The case had been closed. There was only the sentence to be handed down.

He wasn't about to spend the rest of his precious daylight entertaining LaCroix. "You'll see," he answered, starting toward the door.

But LaCroix moved from the chair almost too quickly for his eye to see. He stood between Nicholas and the doorway; his stance, even his smile, were easy, non-threatening. "I think not."

"You won't stop me."

He moved to brush his way past LaCroix, but his arm was caught, held, at the elbow. Their eyes met, inches apart. "You think not?" Then LaCroix released him, lightly lifting fingers from the folds of the coat, and turned his back. "I'm supposed to allow you walk into the sunlight, on a whim? You'd prefer that I let you commit suicide?" When he turned back, there was a mock frown on his face. "For shame, Nicholas. I believe that's referred to as a 'mortal' sin? But then . . . you're no longer mortal."

Nicholas looked to the closed shutters, feeling the coming of the light, the dawning of the sun. "Later," he muttered, refusing to be drawn into the argument.

"But there won't *be* a later . . . not if you have your way." Sighing, LaCroix shook his head, as if disappointed. "Give up this foolishness and take your rest. I've spent the night arguing with mortal fools, I don't intend to waste the day in the same manner."

"Then don't." He took another step toward the door, but paused when he heard the rustle of Janette's skirts just beyond. "I *will* walk in the light."

"And if I forbid it?"

Nicholas met those steel eyes without flinching. "I'm going."

"As I thought." Again, LaCroix moved quickly, but this time he stood behind Nicholas, one arm sliding around his neck in a choke hold, the other pinning his right hand behind his back. "Remember, you haven't fed," he whispered, in Nicholas' ear. "You're weak. Far too weak to even stand the first rays of the dawn. If you're to burn, it will be when I say, *not* before. And, for some reason . . . I don't think I want you to burn. Today."

Nicholas struggled for a moment, then let his weight fall back. The sudden lack of resistance surprised LaCroix, as did the blow to his face, by Nicholas' free hand. He darted forward, leaving LaCroix behind--

But Janette stood in the doorway, her hands stretched to fill the space. "Nicola, you *mustn't*," she pleaded.

She couldn't stop him.

She wasn't meant to. He was struck on the back of the neck by LaCroix, his hands clasped together and moving so swiftly downward that Nicholas fell to his knees. Before he could recover from the sudden jolt, LaCroix put a foot against his chest and kicked him backwards, so that he sprawled upon the floor.

He heard the snap of a rib, but that sudden pain meant less to him than the spinning of the room. For an instant, Nicholas closed his eyes and remained on the floor, his strength having been drained by the fight. He was too hungry and weak to continue.

But if he gave up now, gave in to the weakness of his flesh and hunger, he would lose the light.

As if from a distance, he heard Janette say softly, "Don't hurt him."

LaCroix's answering laughter made him flinch-- "He'll find less harm from me than the sun." He felt himself lifted, as LaCroix slung him over his shoulder. "He wants to see the light. Very well, Nicholas, you shall. You can watch the light as long as you wish, for all I care."

"No!" he cried, summoning up enough will to strike LaCroix in the small of the back, as hard as he could. He wouldn't lose the light. Not now, not when he was so close!

Almost instantly, LaCroix dropped him. Nicholas tumbled away, striking one of the legs of the heavy wooden table, the force of his fall tipping it. The pouch and the candle fell to the wooden floor. He saw Janette pick up the pouch and raise it, as if to snuff out the flame of the fallen candle.

Nicholas scrambled to his feet and wrenched the pouch from her hands in near panic. Janette backed away with a shriek, as if she thought he might strike her. There was fear in her eyes -- he raised his hands, words on his lips, a promise that he didn't mean to hurt or frighten her--

Too late he realized that it wasn't him that she feared, but LaCroix behind him. He turned his head and only barely recognized the shape of the chair with which LaCroix hit him. The wood shattered and scattered, raining down around him, the blow sending him to his knees, then face down to the floor.

And this time he couldn't move. He was not unaware of Janette kneeling beside him, touching his forehead and his hands, kissing his cheek -- he simply couldn't bring himself to awaken enough to respond. The hunger burned so strong and deep within him, the many hours of lost slumber weighed upon his flesh so heavily, that he couldn't bring himself out of the twilight state into which the blow had placed him, however hard he fought.

The floor slid beneath his hands as he was dragged across the room, but he couldn't seem to command them to find purchase, to hang onto anything. He could smell Janette's perfume, heard the light steps of her heel-less shoes, as she danced back and forth, around and beside him.

"LaCroix, let him rest," she begged. "Please?"

"No, I'll give him what he wants," said LaCroix's voice, in a warning tone. "I'll let him see the light, for all the good it will do him. And then maybe he'll learn to--"

But the words faded away as they reached the hard wooden steps down to the cellar. Nicholas was able to muster enough presence of mind to wrap his arms around his face and head to protect himself, as LaCroix dragged him down the steps by his feet like a small child might drag a stuffed toy.

Nick awoke in his bed, his arms raised to ward off the wooden steps. Then he took a deep breath and fell backward against the pillows, exhausted.

It was late afternoon, if that. His body ached, telling him that he should sleep. His eyelids felt weighted. It should have been easy to simply close his eyes and fall again into the dark oblivion of slumber.

But the light was calling. Nick could feel the weight and warmth of it in his chest -- as well as hear the alarms that rang in his inner ears warning him that the world wasn't yet safe enough to walk. Trying to shrug off the feeling and knowing that further sleep would be impossible, he slipped out of bed and headed downstairs.

The room was shadowed with blacks and browns, but he could see well enough -- better than most mortals could in daylight. One of their 'gifts,' one of the compensations for losing the light. Walking down the stairs, his lips twisted in a wry smile as he considered just what he'd been given in exchange for the loss of the daylight. Immortality, eternal youth, extraordinary senses, phenomenal strength . . . each was a gift in and of itself, but meant for some greater purpose, meant to preserve their existence, to make them better hunters that they might venture out, night after night, into eternity.

He walked to the refrigerator and opened the door, his fingers wrapping around a bottle of cow's blood. Eyeing it with distaste, Nick pried out the cork with his fingernails and tossed it into the sink as he passed. There were fewer and fewer opportunities to hunt. As Janette reminded him time and again, even the young ones weren't foolish enough to expose their existence to the modern world of scientific inquiry by leaving too many bloodless corpses scattered in their wake. How soon before they no longer needed to be hunters? How long before the very things that made them what they were -- freaks and curiosities, a

danger to the mortal world -- were bred out of their kind?

He sat down on the couch and tilted back the bottle, swallowing one mouthful of blood, then two. Gazing up at the shutters, he remembered the first time he'd read Darwin's essays on natural selection. What would Darwin have thought of vampires? When the blood was as easy to find and purchase as a six-pack at a neighborhood convenience store, was it possible that vampires would have evolved -- or devolved -- into nothing more than mortals who couldn't tolerate sunlight? Would the nature of the beast, the fangs and golden/green eyes, fall by the road of evolutionary process?

It was a question he would have discussed with LaCroix at great length, in years past. For all of their difficulties, he'd found their discussions interesting, fascinating . . . and maddening. LaCroix's point could seldom be swayed, error was not something he liked to admit, but he could talk circles through an argument until, at the end, you found he held the position to which you'd first subscribed and that you held the opposing thought to be true.

He took another drink from the bottle and set it down on the coffee table, careless of the stains the cold glass would leave on the wood, his dream fresh in his mind and clouding his better judgment of common things. If only LaCroix had been of a mind to listen that dawn! If only he'd tossed aside his solidly held beliefs and -- if it be told -- fear of the burning rays of dawn for only an instant. They might *all* have walked in the light again, at least that once . . .

The painting Kevin had given to him was lying on the coffee table where he'd left it. Nick picked it up and leaned forward. The colors were muted in the darkness, but the light in it was still as strong and clear as it had seemed beneath the fluorescent bulbs in the squad room. He wondered for a moment what it might look like in sunlight-- not direct, of course, because that would be the ruin of a watercolor over time. But once it was framed he might hang it in a place where the light from the window could shine on it. And if he stood in a darkened area of the loft, with the rest of the shutters closed tightly, he could look at it in safety.

But not touch it. Or get too close to the light that would shine on or around it.

Yes, he had a painting. An original. And it was highly improbable that Kevin Seeley would ever do another like it.

If he was even alive . . .

Placing the painting on the coffee table, Nick half rose from the couch and picked up the phone. The number for Mercy Faith Hospital wasn't on his autodial, but -- his lips quirked into a smile -- there were occasionally times when the formidable memory of vampires came in handy. He punched in the number then slumped back onto the couch, idly reaching for the bottle of blood he'd left on the coffee table.

"Mercy Faith Hospital," said a voice.

"Third floor nurse's station, please."

"One moment, please."

Nick cradled the phone between his ear and his shoulder and leaned back against the arm of the couch. He sipped blood from the lip of the bottle, while the muzak version of a dated pop hit droned in the background. The call transfer took less time than he expected, he was caught with a mouthful of blood, swallowed quickly and sputtered as a woman's voice identified herself as the head nurse of the floor.

After a moment's pause and spraying the front of his pajamas with a mist of blood and spit, he frowned, then said, "This is Detective Nick Knight, twenty-seventh Metro Division. I'd like some information about the condition of the two poisoning victims brought in last night, about eleven? A man and a woman -- Edith Crewe and Kevin Seeley."

"Yes, detective. One moment, please."

Nick fruitlessly wiped at the wet spots on the pajamas and thanked fate for small favors-- he recognized her voice from the last time he'd dealt with the hospital on a case. This would make things easier, at least. Hospital bureaucracy was almost as bad, if not worse, than some of the nonsensical administrative hoops he was forced to jump through due to police regulations. Civilization wouldn't end with fire or ice, but buried under an avalanche of forms, attachments, requisitions, and memos.

The phone was lifted again, stopping that hideous muzac. The nurse cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, detective, but Mrs. Crewe passed away just after noon -- her body's been forwarded to the coroner's office for autopsy."

He swallowed -- so much for one witness. But for the witness that was more than a witness-- "And Kevin Seeley?"

Papers rustled in the background. "Mr. Seeley's condition has improved somewhat. Dr. Merrick will be returning for his rounds at five, if you'd like to call him for more information. I *can* transfer you to administration, if you like?"

Kevin was still alive. "Can you give me any more on his condition? I know they tried to blind him--"

"I'm sorry, detective, but you'll have to speak with the doc--"

"All right." Nick took a breath, forced himself to be courteous -- if he got on the wrong side of the hospital staff, he'd never get any information. Ever again. "I'm sorry. Please, can you leave a message for Dr. Merrick? I'll be stopping by the hospital, I'd like his permission to question Kevin Seeley."

"Certainly, detective. I'll make certain he gets the message."

"Thanks." Sighing, Nick wiped his lips with the sleeve of his pajamas and took another swallow from the bottle. He raised himself from the couch enough to hit the autodial for the station.

"Detective Schanke," he asked, when the operator came on the line. The call was patched through with -- thankfully -- no muzac to annoy him while he waited.

"Detective Schanke--"

"Schank -- it's Nick. I just spoke with the hospital about our victims from the dry cleaner's last night."

"The Crewe woman croaked. We got a call from the coroner's office that she's on the list for this evening. Which means we're down to one witness -- if they take Seeley off the critical list."

Nick smiled as he held up the green glass bottle and shook the blood remaining within it. "His condition's been upgraded."

"Great! That's . . . that *is* good, isn't it? I mean, can he see anything or what?"

He tightened his grip on the bottle and held it to his chest. "I don't know. I've made an appointment with his doctor -- thought I'd drop by Mercy Faith first and see if I can get permission to question him."

"Yeah -- if you can get in the front door."

Nick sat up and placed the bottle back on the coffee table. "What?"

"Obviously, you haven't been watching the evening news. Somehow, word got out -- specific word. The media's got Seeley's name *and* that he's our only living witness."

Nick closed his eyes and sunk back against the soft leather of the couch. "Does Stonetree know?"

"I think the reporters at the front desk gave him a clue." Schanke's voice lowered. "If I were you, I'd hide out at the hospital for a while. Our captain is *not* a happy man. Even made me change my tie-- said it was an affront to the service."

"The green one with the beige stripes?" asked Nick, eyes open.

"Yeah. How did you--?"

"He's right." Wearily, he rose from the couch and picked up the remote. "Schank -- if it's all over the news that Kevin's the only witness--"

"Got it covered. We've got a guard posted at his door, extra security around the hospital. Nobody can get to him."

"Well, let's hope *I* can."

"Boy, this case has gone from bad to worse," moaned Schanke. "Our perp stiff is an out-of-towner, we're waiting for prints from NYC, although Chicago's my guess. Until we get an ID on him, we've got nothing on his buddy, not even a description."

Nick held his breath for a moment, toying with the buttons on the remote. "The media coverage -- do they know he's been blinded?"

Again, Schanke paused, Nick could almost hear the wheels turning in his brain. "No. Not that I remember seeing or hearing."

"Good. That'll work for us."

"Well, *something* should. The pressure's on this time, partner -- stuff like this just doesn't happen here . . . thank God. The mayor's even giving a press conference -- wants Stonetree there as backup. Hey, you think he'd want to borrow the tie? Probably look great on camera."

Nick smiled at the thought. "I wouldn't ask."

"Yeah. Well, I see double shifts on the horizon. You wanna call Myra and explain it for me?"

"Offering Stonetree the tie would be quicker," decided Nick. He touched a button on the remote and watched the shutter open, slightly. "Let's hope we get a break, huh?"

"Seeley's alive. That's *something*."

It was still too light outside, another half hour at least. "Yeah. That's something." He took a step back as the light seemed alive, moving toward him across the floor. "You get anything on that suspect, you can reach me here or at the hospital."

"You got it. Gotta go, Stonetree's glaring."

"Don't ask him about the--" The phone disconnected. "Tie."

He placed the receiver in the cradle absently, then picked up the bottle of blood and settled on the couch, content for the moment to drink and see the light shrink back to the windowsill, swallowed by the darkness. That small comfort hadn't been denied him. At least he could watch the light.

Unlike Kevin . . .

Chapter 4

Schanke had been right, the hospital parking lot was dotted with television news crews and their vans, print reporters, and cameramen. It was a media circus in full swing and they looked to be stopping just about anyone coming into or out of the hospital main reception lobby. On a hunch, Nick drove around to the side emergency entrance.

Hospital security staff were posted there, as well as at the front of the building, but there were no reporters to be seen. Nick parked the Caddy in the rear lot, then made the way through emergency by presenting his badge to anyone in a uniform. Eventually, he found himself in an elevator on the way to the third floor. A glance at the wall clock opposite the third floor nurse's station confirmed his fear-- the security delay had made him late. It was ten minutes after five and Dr. Merrick had probably already begun his rounds.

Still hoping, he walked up to the nurse's station, badge in hand. His concern turned to relief when he recognized the young nurse on duty -- he'd met her when investigating Marilyn Siegal's suicide . . . which he'd proven to be murder. He wasn't certain that she'd recognize him, at first.

When she looked up, her face held that careful, 'May I help you,' expression required of even the weariest of hospital staff forced to deal with the often annoyed, frightened, or ill general public. But her smile became genuine when she said, "Detective Knight -- we haven't seen you around here for a while."

"That's usually a good thing," Nick said lightly, pocketing his badge. "Part of the job."

"I suppose." She glanced down at the desk. "We never really got to thank you for . . . what you did for Marilyn. We never would have known." Picking up a pen, she tapped it against the open notebook and looked up at him thoughtfully. "Guess you don't hear that too often, huh? Kind of like the way it works here. People come in when they're sick. If we make them well, we never see them again." Her smile broadened. "It's not fair."

"Very few things are." He leaned on the desk. "I'm looking for Dr. Merrick. I was told Kevin Seeley's his patient."

She hesitated. "Dr. Merrick's late getting out for rounds, but he might be waiting for you. I can have him paged--?"

"If you would."

His earlier dedication to the Siegal case was paying off. The nurse smiled and moved to the intercom. Nick took a step or two away from the desk and leaned against the hospital wall. There were whispers, voices, groans and moans and sighs on the periphery of his hearing, from every room on the floor. He couldn't begin to guess where Kevin Seeley might be, unless he strolled the hospital corridor in search of the one door guarded by a uniformed police officer. *That* would be a dead giveaway.

Hearing the page for Dr. Merrick over the hospital intercom, he turned and smiled at the nurse. She matched his smile, then picked up the phone at the desk when it buzzed. Covering the receiver with her hand, she said, "He'll be here in a minute."

"Thanks." Nick glanced back over at the nurse's station, his eyes falling on photographs tacked up on the bulletin board behind the desk -- they'd been taken by Marilyn Siegal. He found himself staring at them across the distance. How much these people must have thought of her, if her pictures were still here, still meant something. It was almost a shrine to her memory, to the joy and life that shone from her smile, her posture.

In a way, she'd helped him through a bad patch, too. His luck had been down, he hadn't been able to solve a case for weeks and he'd begun to question whether he was making a difference. Erica's suicide had almost been the last straw. But in solving Dr. Siegal's murder, in proving that a woman so in love with life couldn't have committed suicide, he'd proven that he could do the job, see the truth through all the lies and weariness that sometimes made the world such a difficult place to endure. It wasn't fair, that she'd been taken from the world. But he'd done right by her. The nurse was correct in that justice had prevailed.

But he couldn't bring her back. He couldn't return that one bright, light spirit to the world. Just as he couldn't stop what had happened to Kevin Seeley. Some things were beyond him, no matter how much he wished to the contrary. But he still had a feeling that there was something he could do, *should* do, for Kevin.

A doctor approached the desk. Nick straightened, but the doctor moved directly to the nurse. "What else could go wrong tonight?" he asked glumly. "I'm late for rounds as it is."

The nurse gestured toward Nick, who took a step toward them. "This is Detective Knight," she explained. "Detective, this is Dr. Merrick."

"Thank you," Dr. Merrick said wearily, before turning his attention to Nick. "Detective Knight?" he asked, peering over his brown horn-rimmed eyeglasses, lips taut in a frown. "With the police? Are you responsible for those people downstairs? I can't even get a cup of coffee without running a gauntlet of twenty people wanting to see my I.D. badge."

"No, I'm not -- I'm with Homicide. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, I was stopped by security myself." He withdrew his badge from his pocket. "I wanted to speak with you about Kevin Seeley's condition. And . . . I'd like to question him."

"I can give you a run down, but there's no way in hell you can interrogate him," said Dr. Merrick, his

frown still in place as he watched Nick put his badge away. "He's in fair condition. If he hadn't managed to vomit those toxins, he'd be dead now. As it was, it scarred the hell out of his esophagus." He paused and lifted his eyeglasses from his face, rubbing his hand across his closed eyelids. "He won't need surgery, thank God. But he needs rest."

"We need a description of the suspect," explained Nick.

"So I heard, on every television and radio station I've tuned in since this morning." Merrick glanced away. "I'd say someone dropped the ball on your end of things. And I'm not about to endanger the welfare of my patient because someone's putting heat on you from downtown, or wherever the hell it is the ax falls from onto you people."

Dr. Merrick started to walk away, but Nick kept pace with him. "Believe me, I could care less who's putting pressure on whom. I want the man who did this off the streets, before he thinks about trying it with someone else." His words slowed Merrick and, as the doctor turned toward him, Nick added, "You've said yourself that he's gotten a lot of media coverage. What happens if he likes it? What happens if he tries to do it again?"

The doctor met his eyes, as if measuring the truth of his words. "You've got no other leads?"

"None at the moment. We may have a better idea in a few hours--"

"But you can't take the chance." Merrick nodded. Glancing at the nurse's station, he drew Nick to one side, his voice low. "Detective, I understand your situation. And I sympathize. But I don't believe you'll get much out of Mr. Seeley at the moment. He can't talk. He was lucky enough not to breathe that crap into his lungs, but, as I said, there's damage to the pharynx and soft palate."

Nick took a quick breath. "What about his vision?"

Dr. Merrick looked away. "I'm not an ophthalmologist, but . . . I wouldn't say there's any hope. His corneas are gone, the irises are burned beyond any hope of recovery and the lenses are scarred. I've no idea how much internal damage was done to his eyes by the corrosive -- I'd say the optic nerves are probably gone as well. The EMT's were good -- they brought us samples from the scene so at least we knew what we were dealing with. But," his eyes met Nick's, "I'm afraid there isn't anything available to deal with that sort of damage. With the advances being made in corrective eye surgery, even transplantation, perhaps in fifteen years or even ten, there might be something out there to help him regain a small portion of what he's lost."

"A small portion. Perhaps. Maybe." Nick repeated the words softly, then looked down at the floor.

"I know," said Merrick sympathetically, "he won't be much of an eyewitness. But if you can catch this man, it's still possible that Mr. Seeley will be able to identify his voice."

He licked his lips and gave the doctor a reassuring smile. Obviously, he hadn't been told that Kevin was an artist. And there was no way he could know that Nick was more concerned for the young man's future than the victim being able to identify his attacker in a police line-up or court setting. "We'll find something," he promised.

But there *were* police matters to be dealt with. Nick took another breath. "Is he conscious?"

Merrick nodded slightly. "We've given him medication for the pain. He's . . . fairly lucid. There hasn't

been any real need for sedation. His fiancée was in to see him earlier. But, as I said, he can't talk. And I'd rather not risk further damage by having him attempt to--"

"I read lips," Nick explained quickly. "And -- I'd like to see him. He works part time for us. I want to let him know that we haven't forgotten about him."

If he had to, he could hypnotize the doctor, gain the permission for an interview through force of will -- but he didn't know enough about Kevin's medical condition to second-guess a professional, no matter how desperate their need of an eyewitness description of the suspect. If his efforts cost Kevin his voice, in addition to the loss of his sight--

Dr. Merrick smiled grimly after a moment's consideration. "All right, Detective . . . you've convinced me. Human contact is as essential to a patient's recovery as surgery or medication. Yes, he's been quiet. Too quiet. And that concerns me. Your visit might just help. But--" the doctor cautioned, raising a hand in warning, "I want to be present. And you leave when I say, okay?"

"Thank you," answered Nick.

Dr. Merrick called to the nurse stationed at the desk, "I'm already late for rounds -- have Dr. Thomas start without me. I'll catch him up when I've finished."

"Yes, doctor," answered the nurse. She gave Nick a wink when the doctor moved away, her hand already reaching for the phone.

Nick matched his pace with that of the doctor, following the man down the main corridor, taking the first right and next left. Hospital corridors had a tendency to look the same. He needed to know this place well. His memory would hold all the details until the building itself had crumbled and crashed in upon itself centuries from now . . . if he should survive that long. But for now he needed to assure himself, and the captain, that everything was being done to protect Kevin from a suspect who'd already proven to be callous about the taking of human life.

There was a uniformed officer seated in front of Kevin's room. He looked up as they approached and rose from his chair. Nick gave him a nod and a smile -- they recognized one another. "Anything?" asked Nick.

"Not a sign of him." The officer gestured toward the door with his thumb and met the doctor's eyes. "A couple of the guys were asking if the kid's gonna make it."

"I think so," said the doctor, glancing over at Nick.

"Good." Then the officer cleared his throat. "I heard they passed the hat at the station, while I was on duty here." He reached into his back pocket and withdrew his wallet, flipping it open and withdrawing a few bills. "If you'd make sure they get that. I know it's not much . . ."

Nick hesitated before taking the money. Then he wrapped his fingers around the cash, making a mental note to open his own wallet when he hit the station. And it occurred to him that an additional anonymous contribution from a 'concerned citizen' wouldn't be out of place, with all of the publicity that Kevin's case had received. "It's more than enough," he said, touching the officer's shoulder lightly in passing. "I'll make certain they get it . . . and know where it came from."

"Thanks."

"Eyes sharp," noted Nick, gesturing toward the corridor, and the officer nodded, a stern expression on his face as he sat down on the chair. It never failed to amaze him how much a part of this 'family' he'd become, how accepted he was by everyone from the civilian administration, to the cops on the beat, to the brass. It touched a part of him that he'd thought long dead. And the responsibility of it frightened him just a little from time to time.

His own smile faded as he hesitated in the doorway, following the doctor into the room. For this was one of the times when the burden of service had to be shouldered and the weight wasn't lessened by the number who shared in it.

The blinds at the windows had been drawn against the night. The overhead fluorescent lights shone brightly. But neither mattered to Kevin. The upper portion of the bed had been raised slightly, so that he wasn't lying down, but neither was he sitting up. His eyes were bandaged, the gauze wrapped around his head, bright against his dark skin and hair. His mouth and nose were free -- they hadn't hooked him up to any oxygen or breathing apparatus, although Nick's keen vision could still see the marks from an earlier presence. An IV drip hung suspended from a bar at the head of the bed, connected to Kevin's left arm.

Nick was thankful to note that Kevin wasn't being given blood. He swallowed, knowing that it would always be a distraction to him, no matter how well he'd fed. He waited at the door, suddenly uncertain of what to do or say. Was Kevin even awake? His hands were clutching the light sheet and blanket that covered him, but he'd made no sign that he knew they were there. If he was awake, surely he would have heard the door open?

Dr. Merrick cleared his throat loudly and walked toward the bed. He touched Kevin's hand. "Kevin, there's someone here to see you. A Detective Knight, from the police?"

Nick saw Kevin's body stiffen and heard the barest croaking sound, but Merrick tightened his grip on Kevin's right hand. "No -- none of that. We talked about that earlier. You wore yourself out with your fiancée. No talking. But the detective wanted to pass along some messages from your friends on the force. And he wanted to ask you some questions. You won't have to answer aloud -- he reads lips. So just form your words. And if you feel at all tired, you just squeeze my hand twice, all right?"

Nick took a step toward the bed and saw Kevin nod slightly, his fingers closing around Merrick's once. Merrick looked back at Nick and nodded. "All right, detective. I think we can spare five minutes."

Again, he found himself at a loss for words. What could he say?

"Hi, Kevin. I heard -- I heard your fiancée was by. I'm sorry I missed her."

Kevin smiled, then his lips formed the words, "Hi, Nick. Didn't know you'd be by . . ."

"Stopped on my way in, thought I'd check how you were doing," explained Nick. "I was -- Schanke and I are the primaries on your -- on the case," he corrected quickly.

"I'm the . . . only witness."

Nick read the message, then glanced back over his shoulder, at the television sitting across from the bed. The remote was resting beside Kevin's hand. "We've got a man out front and we've doubled hospital security," he explained. "We won't let anyone get to you."

"But you don't know what he looks like?"

Nick glanced at the doctor, pretty certain that Merrick was only understanding the spoken portion of the conversation. "Not until you tell us."

There was a raspy sound from Kevin's throat and his head turned slightly. He raised one hand to his face. "Skin, darker."

"Darker than yours," noted Nick. "All right. What else?"

"Eyes set apart, by at least an inch, maybe two. Front teeth -- gold one in left front."

Nick cleared his throat. "I think you're describing the suspect who was killed last night."

"Killed?" Kevin's lips twisted in a frown and he shifted again. "He held me down. The other one poured the stuff in my eyes . . ." His left hand rose to the bandages on his eyes, the cord connecting him to the IV swaying slightly at the movement.

"And what did that one look like?" asked Nick.

"Skin -- the same tone. Eyes brown, upper lip short and thin. Eyelids heavy. Five foot nine, maybe ten. Needle marks on arms. Skinny."

"Maybe a heroin user." Nick cleared his throat, glancing at the doctor again, but Merrick simply stood there, holding Kevin's right hand. "What was he wearing?"

"Basketball T-shirt, no sleeves. Blue and orange, Chicago high school -- didn't catch the name. Jeans, dirty and ripped. Sneakers dirty, white with orange stripes." Again, Kevin made a raspy noise in his throat and Nick saw Merrick's hand tighten. But Kevin shook his head. "Pencil. Paper."

Nick swallowed, then looked at the doctor. "He wants a pencil and paper." When Dr. Merrick looked at him, an eyebrow raised, he added, "Kevin's a sketch artist."

The doctor's eyes darkened and he frowned. He took a pen from his coat pocket, then released Kevin's hand and moved to a small table beside the bed, on which sat two flower arrangements. From the drawer he withdrew a few pieces of stationery, then lifted the Bible from the drawer and placed the paper atop the book.

Carefully, the doctor rested the book on Kevin's chest. As Kevin shifted in an attempt to sit up, Dr. Merrick said, "No -- wait and I'll raise the bed for you. You'll be more comfortable." He touched the control on the side of the bed and it raised, until Kevin nodded. When he was settled, Dr. Merrick pressed the pen into his right hand.

Smiling, Kevin shifted the pen to his left hand. He felt it, frowning. "Pen?" he asked.

Nick had never felt so much at a loss for not having a pencil. "I can run back to the nurse's station--" he offered.

But Kevin shook his head. "Probably suck worse in pencil," he said. He placed his right hand on the paper, in an attempt to hold it flat, to keep it from moving.

A clipboard would have helped tremendously, but between Kevin's sheer determination and the thunderclouds that loomed in Dr. Merrick's eyes, Nick hesitated on mentioning that fact. He watched in anguish as Kevin tried to draw by touch alone.

The lines were disjointed, disconnected. Kevin gritted his teeth, somehow knowing that the lines were wrong but still trying. He pressed hard against the stubbly surface of the book cover, feeling the indentation of the lines with his fingertips, then drawing from there. The sounds from deep in his throat were angry and unintelligible. After a moment, his hand began to shake. But still, he continued to draw.

"I think that's enough," said Dr. Merrick. He reached forward and tried to take the pen from Kevin's hand, but Kevin held onto it tightly, shaking his head. His mouth opened and closed, the sound that came from him close to a sob.

Quickly, Nick moved forward and took the paper, careful to leave the book where it was. "Kevin, this is fine." Placing his free hand around Kevin's left hand, he took care to avoid the IV line, which was still swinging freely. "It's a hell of a lot more than we had. And it may help us catch this guy."

Kevin stopped struggling and after a moment, his fingers slid from the pen. He grabbed Nick's hand with his own, both of his own. "I'm . . . sorry," he said. "I can't -- I can't--"

"It's good," promised Nick. "Really. We had nothing before. You may have cracked the case." As Kevin's grip tightened around his, he choked back something that seemed to lodge in his throat. "We'll find him. I promise you -- we'll find him."

"It's time to go," said Dr. Merrick, not bothering to hide the anger in his voice.

Nick glanced up at him with a guilty expression, then looked back at Kevin. "Yeah. Better get back to the squad room before Stonetree puts out an APB on me. Somebody's gotta keep Schanke outta the donuts, right?"

Kevin gave him a forced smile. "Right. Yeah. Thanks for stopping by."

"I'll be back," Nick promised, focusing on Kevin, not *daring* to meet Merrick's fiery gaze. "As soon as I can." He withdrew his hand from Kevin's, but Kevin's fingers tightened around his for a second.

"I'm sorry," Kevin said again. "I never got to see . . . your paintings."

Nick straightened suddenly; the lump in his throat was now on the point of choking him. "We'll set up something," he said. "We'll . . . work something out."

"Yeah." Kevin's hand fell from his. "We will."

"I'll be back to check on you later, Kevin," said Dr. Merrick, touching Kevin's shoulder lightly. "Try to get some rest, okay?"

Kevin's answer was little more than a low grunt. But he settled back as Dr. Merrick took away the Bible, replacing it in the drawer, and touched the bed controls to lower the head area. Nick stood at the doorway, watching. He clutched the paper to his chest with his left hand. His right still held the impression of Kevin's frantic grip, but that was fading far faster than his memory ever could.

Dr. Merrick grabbed his arm on the way out, opening the door and almost hurling him into the hallway.

Nick caught himself on the far side, then raised his hand to tell the cop on duty that everything was all right -- the man was half out of his chair.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me he was a sketch artist?" demanded the doctor angrily, after the door had closed behind them.

Straightening, Nick looked around, noticing that the raised voice was drawing attention. "I didn't think you'd have let me in there."

"You're damned right I wouldn't have let you in there! I wouldn't have let you within twenty feet of him, fifty feet of him." Dr. Merrick ran his hand back through his hair, still glaring at Nick. "Do you have any idea what you just did to him in there?"

"I thought it would help--"

"Help? Christ, that kid's going to need enough therapy, without you screwing with his mind." The doctor looked down at the floor and took a deep breath, as if trying to collect himself.

"I'm sorry," said Nick softly. "I know what -- I know what he's going through."

"You have no *idea* what he's going through." When the doctor looked up, his voice was lower, but his eyes were still hard and angry. "I'd appreciate it, *detective*, if you have your partner or someone else deal with Kevin from now on. Can you manage that? Or will I have to call your superior?"

Nick straightened again and met the man's gaze. "I'm with twenty-seventh division, Captain Stonetree. I'm only doing my job, Dr. Merrick. Just like you're doing yours. And if it means anything, yes, I *do* know what Kevin's going through. I want to get the bastard that did that to him. *And* killed four other people last night."

Feeling the gold on the edge of his vision, the anger rising in him, he looked down, away, and ran the back of his hand along his lips. He wasn't about to lose it here and now. He had a case to work on, a description to get on the wire.

But when he looked back, Merrick was watching him with an odd expression. "Maybe you do know," he admitted, after a second's pause. "Family member? Friend?"

"Something like that," said Nick evasively.

"All right. So you know we've got to be careful with him. He's been told that his loss of sight is probably permanent, but I don't think he's quite comprehended that. What you just did was push him toward a truth he's not ready to deal with."

Nick only half heard the doctor's words. As he stared at Kevin's door, he could hear choking sobs from within the room. Closing his eyes, he bowed his head. "You're right. I didn't want -- I never meant--"

He opened his eyes and looked up as Merrick put a hand on his shoulder. "I know. Just like I know that's the first reaction I've gotten out of him. If you want to come back--" Merrick hesitated, as Nick met his eyes, expression hopeful. "I'd like you to come back and visit him. Tomorrow, some time. But -- no artwork," warned the doctor.

"No artwork," promised Nick. He managed a weak smile and added. "Thanks," as he walked back to the elevator.

But the sound of Kevin's hoarse sobbing filled his ears until the elevator doors closed behind him, drowning out the sound of the machine as it started its descent. Only then did he remember the paper still clutched in his hand.

Smoothing it carefully, Nick held it up against the wall of the elevator. It was nothing more than a series of swirls and lines, looking more like the efforts of a two year old with his first crayon than a young artist well on the way to fulfilling the promise of his innate talent. Something in him wanted to crumple up the paper, hurl it to the floor in a fit of anger, destroy it.

But something else, some sense of propriety and respect for what had been lost stayed his hand. When Nick left the elevator and walked out the emergency exit to his car, he held the paper flat against his chest, protecting it from the ravages of a vagrant breeze or the elements. He protected it from the world as he hadn't be able to protect Kevin. And he thought again that there might be something more he might do to redress the error that chance had made in taking the young artist's sight.

Chapter 5

As Nick entered her lab in the Coroner's Office, Natalie looked up from her desk. Her hair was tied back tightly, but she was out of her greens and in her work clothes. He managed to form at least a half-hearted smile. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself," she countered. Glancing back down at her paperwork, she scribbled something then dropped the pen to the desk and gestured toward a sheet-covered corpse on a gurney. "Just finished Edith Crewe."

Nick walked over to the corpse. He couldn't see anything beneath the sheet, other than that amorphous body shape that designated this person as one who had passed out of life and into darkness. "And?"

"No surprise. Shock and internal trauma caused by ingesting toxic substances. Poisoning." Remaining where he was, he heard her rise to her feet. "The lab'll get back with the exact mix of chemicals and brands, although it won't be hard to connect everything to the dry- cleaners." When she sighed, he could almost feel her breath at his shoulder. "Four perfectly healthy people. Poisoned."

"And one blinded," reminded Nick, very softly.

"Kevin Seeley?"

"I just came from the hospital."

Natalie took a quick breath. "He's conscious?"

"He gave me a description of the suspect." Again he forced the wan smile, looking over his shoulder and meeting her gaze. "A good description. Solid. It's on the wire."

Her eyes widened slightly. "I'm surprised he could talk."

"He couldn't. I read lips."

"Oh." And, when he parroted a silent, "Oh," back at her, she smiled and shook her head. "He must be pretty well off, then. Otherwise the doctor never would have permitted--"

Nick looked away as she mentioned the doctor. Tucking his hands in his jacket pockets, his gaze fell on the sheet-covered corpse again.

"Nick?" pressed Natalie, suspicion coloring her voice. "The doctor *was* there, wasn't he?"

"Oh, he was there. And he pretty much had the same assessment of the suspect you gave me last night -- we need to get this one locked up fast. He told me I could question Kevin, get a description."

He didn't need to see her to know what her expression might be, Natalie wasn't fooled by his evasions. "What did you do?"

Instinctively, he reached inside his coat pocket to touch the piece of paper he'd so carefully folded. "Kevin asked for a pencil and paper. He wanted to sketch the subject for me." When he turned, withdrawing the paper from his jacket, Natalie's eyes were cold. He held out the paper and she took it. "That's what he drew."

Natalie opened the paper and turned her back to him. He watched her shoulders stiffen as she took in the disconnected lines. "The doctor didn't know Kevin was a sketch artist. You didn't tell him. Nick--!"

The disappointment in her tone lanced into him. "I needed a description. You said yourself . . ."

Even to his ears it sounded lame. Natalie turned, still carefully holding the sketch. "If I'd been that doctor," she said slowly, "I would have thrown you out on your ass. And then I would've called Stonetree."

Her eyes looked up, questioning him. Nick managed a shrug. "We came close," he admitted, after a second. Then, he looked down. "I didn't realize what would happen. And Kevin -- the doctor said that he's not responding like he should. But that's no excuse for pushing him like that."

Natalie placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know you won't believe me, but I have to say it anyway -- Nick, it's not *your* fault. The best thing you can do to help Kevin is support him. Just be there. That's why the doctor didn't come down on you, he knows Kevin's going to need all the friends he can get. You don't have answers and no one expects you to, least of all Kevin. You can't give him back his eyes."

"Maybe . . ." Nick licked his lips, then dared a glance at her. "Maybe I can."

It took a moment for his words to sink in. Once they did, he saw her thoughts flash behind her eyes, her expression changing from surprise, to astonishment, to anger. "You're not thinking--" He drew back from her, turned away, but she turned him back to face her, her hand still on his shoulder. "No. Tell me you're *not*."

Nick shook off her hand and followed the movement by stalking past her. "It's the nature of the beast," he said lightly. "We're predatory. Recent wounds heal without a scar when you're brought across. I've seen twisted and crippled limbs straighten, amputated hands and fingers grow back in some cases. We're meant to hunt. That's why we're the way we are, that's why our senses are sharp, perfect." Only then did he face her, needing her to understand. "I can give him back his eyes."

"But you'll kill him to do it."

There was no sympathy in her gaze or expression. "You said we're not dead," Nick reminded her softly.

Her frown tightened into a grim line. "Don't you throw that back at me." She pressed Kevin's drawing against his chest and, as his hands moved to grab it, she stalked away, furious.

"Nat--"

She whirled toward him, pointing her finger. "You made me *beg* you to save Richard, to bring him across."

He winced at the hurt tone of her accusation. Something tightened in his chest as he answered, "Look how well that turned out."

"And you're thinking about doing it *again*?" She took a step forward, staring at him, as if trying to find an answer in his expression. "Why? You hardly know him. Before last night, I don't think I've ever heard you mention him."

"He's . . . an artist," Nick said, after a second's pause. Natalie's expression didn't soften and he looked away, trying to find sensible reasons for her when he'd had found none for himself. "He gave me one of his pictures, a watercolor. Nat, if you could see the light in that picture, in his work--"

"And you want to take the light away from him?"

"He's lost it. It's gone."

"Only his sight is gone, but not the warmth of the light, the taste of it, the feel of it. If you bring him across, he'll lose *that* instead." When he refused to look at her, Natalie moved closer. "I can't believe you're even entertaining the idea. Nick, you know how hard you want to get out of this. And you want to make him like you?"

Her fingers grabbed his free hand over the picture. Nick looked down at his hand, then up to her eyes. "He wanted -- he wanted to see my paintings."

"That's the best reason I've heard so far." As Nick pulled away from her hand and her sarcasm, she followed him around the gurney. "What if you can't control him? What if he's like . . . like Richard?"

Her voice nearly broke on the last comment and Nick stopped moving away from her. Meeting her gaze, he placed his hand on her shoulder, promising, "He won't be like Richard."

"No, he won't." Natalie placed her hand over his. "Richard didn't have a choice-- I made it for him. He was dying. But Kevin's *alive*."

Nick looked down at the picture in his other hand. "No. No, he's not. If you'd seen him when he drew this . . ."

"That's to be expected. It's going to take him time to get through this. And you'd be a better friend to him by supporting him than turning him into--" When he met her eyes, she stopped in mid-sentence.

"Into what?" asked Nick softly, his hand dropping from her shoulder. "A monster? Like me?"

"Into something that you or he can't control," said Natalie firmly. "Into something that you'll end up destroying."

Staring into her eyes, he saw that she was right -- he *couldn't* trust himself to turn Kevin. There'd been spectacular failures in his past attempts at bringing others across into the darkness. He wanted to save Kevin's sight, save his light, not destroy him. "You're right."

Natalie smiled. "I am?"

"You are." He raised a hand to touch her cheek lightly, then took a step away from her, refolding Kevin's drawing and placing it in his pocket. "I'll find someone else to do it."

She took a breath, then released a choking sound that was almost like a disbelieving laugh. "You'll *what*? Nick, that's crazy."

"Crazy is some maniac taking away this man's life, his talent. It's not right to let this happen. Not while I can do something about it."

"Can't you see that what you're doing is just as bad, just as unfair?"

Nick's sudden determination wavered, as this seemingly sound answer began to show chinks much as his earlier answer had. "Not if I give him a choice."

Natalie raised an eyebrow as he met her eyes. "A . . . choice. Like you had?"

"I was tricked," he said quickly.

"And is Kevin going to say the same thing?" He winced and moved toward the door, but she followed, catching his arm.

"He'll have his sight back."

"But what about tomorrow? Or a month from now? Or a year? Or five hundred years?" Natalie released her grip on his jacket and took a step back. "Look, I can't support you in this. I *won't* support you in this. And I won't help you. But--"

Nick met her eyes, searching them for some sign of approval, some sign that told him that he *was* doing the right thing. "What? Tell me."

"Make sure you give him that choice." Her eyes wide, she added, "Nick, for the sake of your soul, tell him the truth. Tell him *everything*. Because if this goes wrong . . ."

"It *won't*," he promised. Catching her hand, he pressed her fingers to his lips. "Thanks, Nat. Thanks. And I will," Nick called over her shoulder, as he headed toward the door at a run. "I'll tell him *everything*."

He gave Grace a wave as he left, making his way out of the Coroner's Office and building, down to the curb and his Caddy. He'd been right to talk to Nat; she'd given him the answer. This time *wouldn't* be like Richard because Nick would find someone else to bring Kevin across.

Natalie had been right about giving Kevin a choice. The sobbing he'd heard from Kevin's room still echoed in his ears and only furthered his resolve to make certain Kevin knew all of the pros and cons of this alternate lifestyle before he made any decision. Although Nick was very certain what that decision would be -- what artist deprived of his sight wouldn't give the world for the return of his eyes?

For the return of the light.

* * *

At first, his only thought was how his hands and arms stung from being smacked against the hard wooden steps to the cellar. The bruises would heal quickly enough once he fed, but for now there was a slight discomfort, a tingling from the injured areas.

The smooth planking of the wooden floor was cold against his cheek. The cellar of the house still smelled faintly of beeswax and the oils and perfume that were added to the candles once produced here. The chandler had left this house long before LaCroix had acquired it, but those older scents still lingered, covering the death smells left by the corpses stored in this cool place when the river outside was too well frozen to receive the fleshy remnants of their feedings.

Nicholas couldn't quite bring his senses back to order. He heard the sounds of steps and voices -- Janette's was clear first, as her slippers tapped down the stairs and across the floor. "--I'll bring him something, then. He needs to feed--"

"He'll feed after this madness passes. He's strong enough in this state -- any stronger and he might harm either of us. Or should I let him drag you out into the sunlight?"

If she made any reply other than a fearful whimper, it was drowned out by the clank of chain. Cool metal touched his wrist and Nicholas jerked his hand away, trying to get his arm beneath him as he opened his eyes. But a boot heel was planted along the side of his neck, pinning him to the floor.

LaCroix had snapped a heavy iron band around his wrist. Nicholas ignored LaCroix for a moment, his unfocused eyes following the length of the chain attached to the band, as it wound its way up the wall, through a number of iron studs inserted in the plaster and brick, over the beams and hooks where the rendering pot was once swung over a round circle of stones. When LaCroix stepped away, releasing him, Nicholas tried to stumble to his feet, but was caught up in the chain and crashed back against the wall. His fingers fumbled at the manacle fastened around the ankle of his boot.

"You can spend the day here, watching the light," said LaCroix. "That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

Nicholas carefully disentangled his leg from the chain and rose, his back against the wall. LaCroix stood not so far from him, arms folded across his chest. Janette posed beside him, her eyes first on LaCroix, then darting to the barred window that sat high in the wall, near the ceiling of the cellar.

It could barely be called a window-- it was just a slit to allow some air into the space. But it *did* allow the light to enter; a small finger of brightness glared from it and shone in a spot on the floor.

Nicholas put his strength against the chain on his arm, wrapping a few lengths around his wrist to prevent the cuff from cutting him, but there was no give from any of the wall studs or the chain itself.

"Always thought that might come in handy," said LaCroix. "We did right not to clear out this mess when we arrived."

Inevitably, Nicholas gave up, panting. "Let me go."

"When this madness has passed. We'll check on you after sunset." LaCroix took a step toward the stairwell. "Janette?"

She looked over her shoulder at him, then dashed to Nicholas and put her arms around his neck. "Oh, tell him you'll behave," she pleaded softly and urgently, pressing a kiss on his cheek. "Nicola, tell him you'll be good and won't go out into the sunlight." Her hands brushed over his face and his neck, his shoulders. "Please, tell him."

"You have to try," he said, brushing her lips with hers when she came close, kissing her hair. "You *must* try to walk in the light. It will work today. I *know* it will."

"Do you see?" said LaCroix. He moved toward them, back from the staircase, and held out his hand to her. "Come, Janette. Or . . . would you like to stay down here for the day?"

She tightened her grip on his hair and his neck. Nicholas could feel her body shudder against him as her eyes moved to the growing spot of brightness on the floor. "LaCroix, let him go. He'll burn in this place. The light will reach him by noon--"

"He won't burn," promised LaCroix. He pointed toward a spot on the floor, quite close. "It will reach here and no further. Now, leave Nicholas and come upstairs with me." When she didn't move at once, LaCroix leaned forward and grabbed the metal chained cowl that held her hair back from her face. "Come!" he commanded.

Janette was moving as he tugged at her hair. The chained hair covering ripped in his grasp, the metal links stretching and breaking, scattering across the floor. Her dark hair fell free and the momentum sent her flying. Nicholas strained as best he could against the chains that held him, but could not touch her. Before LaCroix could do more than reach out for her, Janette tumbled to the floor, landing in the area bright with sunlight.

Her shriek reverberated against the stone walls, deafening them for a brief second. Throwing her hand in front of her face, she continued to scream. LaCroix grabbed her arm and pulled her across the floor, out of danger.

But then Janette stopped screaming. LaCroix looked down at his hand, which had entered the beam of sunlight to grab hold of her -- it was untouched. His expression was amazed and Nicholas strained against the chains as Janette rose to her feet, equally astonished. There was not a mark on her. Her skin hadn't smoked or burned or blistered. The blue eyes she turned to him were set in a face as smooth and unmarked as it had ever been.

"That's what I was saying," he told them, the hoarseness of his voice offset by joy. "The light can't hurt us today. We can walk in the light until dusk."

"Can we?" LaCroix moved to stand beside the patch of light. After a moment's hesitation, he looked over at Nicholas then moved his hand into the bright area again. Despite Janette's sudden cry of alarm, there was no sign that anything was amiss -- LaCroix did not burn. "It seems you might be right, Nicholas." He drew his hand back and touched it, running his other palm along the sun-warmed skin. "Perhaps further investigation's in order after all."

"Then, you'll let Nicola go?" asked Janette, as LaCroix helped her to her feet.

Nicholas held his breath as LaCroix's steel gray eyes met his across the distance of the basement. The corner of LaCroix's mouth curled into a slight smile as he said, "Not yet. Not until I'm certain he's free of this madness. And that this business is what it seems."

"You can't leave me here!" cried Nicholas, the chains clanking as he strained against them, trying to pull himself away from the wall. "You've seen it yourself, the light can't hurt us today."

"But you might hurt yourself," said LaCroix. "And that I won't allow." With a firm grasp on Janette's shoulder, he led her to the stairs. "Come, Janette -- let's test out Nicholas' theory, shall we?"

"No! You can't leave me!" he cried. Forgetting himself, he released the slack on the chain as they moved up the steps slowly, Janette daring to give him a sad, sympathetic glance over her shoulder. The rough edge of the metal cuff cut into his skin and drew blood, but he ignored it. "No!"

"Until later," called LaCroix. The heavy wooden door to the upper floor slammed shut, the booming sound echoing in the darkness.

Nicholas pulled at the length of chain, then squatted and tried his hand at the cuff at his ankle, but neither was going to give. He looked up, only to see that LaCroix had been right -- as the sun rose, the square of light on the floor had moved. It was harmless, but he couldn't reach it, chained as he was.

"No," he whispered, eyes scanning the length of the links again for any sign of weakness. But much as he pulled or tested them, there was no chance of give. The studs in the wall remained fixed and solid, meant to hold a rendering pot that could have weighed as much as fifty men.

"No! You can't leave me here!" he bellowed, at the top of his lungs. "LaCroix!"

His calls went unanswered, even though Nicholas shouted until his voice grew hoarse and his lips could no longer form words.

And still the light shone brightly, moving across the floor just beyond his reach.

Chapter 6

The memory of that morning made his throat dry and he knew he'd be tempted to accept Janette's standing offer of a drink -- it would be from the stock she kept on hand for him and not her own libation preference. But as he passed the bouncer, thoughts of feeding were drowned out by the pulsating music.

Dancers were few and far between at The Raven. Nick threaded his way easily through the club, a half-smile on his lips as he nodded to this or that regular. They recognized him as one of their own -- even the mortals who frequented the club had grown to accept his occasional, brief visits. In fact, a brunette at the bar smiled at him, raising her glass in his direction.

There was a tap on his shoulder and Nick turned quickly, but not quickly enough as Janette danced out of his reach. "What is it about you that so attracts them?" she cooed, inclining her head toward the mortal woman at the bar.

"Maybe you can tell me," he countered.

As he walked toward her, Janette continued to back away, her movements slow and careful, in time to the beat of the music. She turned her back to him. "Ah, now that might take some time. But then, we have eternity, no?"

The glance she gave him over her shoulder was smoldering, filled with promise and passion. Nick looked away, back to the woman at the bar, then to some safer, darker portion of the club. "That's not why I'm here."

"No?" Janette sighed. "Then it must be *work* again. Nicola, you're becoming such a bore--"

He caught her wrist before she could escape him and slid his other hand down to her waist. In three steps and a twirl, he waltzed her into a quiet corner of the club. "Not work either," he said, as she leaned back against the wall. He placed his arm over her head, all but pinning her in place. "It's personal."

"Hmnnnn. Now you're beginning to intrigue me." Janette touched a lace-gloved finger to her choker and met his eyes, her smile sharp. "Personal, but *not* personal?"

"I want to bring someone across."

A veil seemed to fall across her eyes and she covered her mouth with her hand prettily, pretending to yawn. "I was right, *boring*. You've tried this recently. And failed. Miserably." Slipping beneath his arm, she headed away, saying, "LaCroix is right, you *never* learn from your mistakes."

"Oh, I learn," said Nick. He planted his hand on her shoulder before she could get too far and turned her to face him. "Which is why I'm not going to bring him across."

"Him?" Janette shook his hand from her shoulder with a shrug, but didn't stalk off; he could see that she was still intrigued. "Another 'relative'?"

"An artist."

Again, she touched her finger lightly to her choker, turning from him and taking a step away. "Perhaps. It has promise. Tell me, then -- if you don't plan to bring across this artist, then who--?"

"I want you to do it."

She whirled at his words, staring in disbelief. But when Nick met her gaze evenly, she shook her head, a slight smile creasing her lips. "I almost believe you're serious."

"I *am* serious." He caught her hand in his. "I've made too many mistakes. I can't afford to fail this time. That's why I want you to do it."

"Even supposing I'd do something this outrageous--" She looked away from him, then shrugged, her smile dismissive. "It wouldn't work. I told you -- I get greedy. I wouldn't stop in time."

"I'd stop you," he promised fervently.

Her blue eyes were wide as she looked back to him. Biting lightly on her lip, she searched his eyes, his face, as if looking for something hidden. "I think you might try. And, maybe succeed. But--" Janette shook her head and removed her hand from his, folding her arms, "No. I've got the club to amuse me for now."

A fledgling would only be a distraction. An annoyance."

"I'll help you care for him. Teach him."

Again her eyes widened. "Nicola, what *has* come over you? The last time you were here, you wouldn't admit that you owed your own any debt beyond giving them life. And now you not only want me to bring someone across, you're willing to care for him until he's ready to go out on his own?"

There was still a raw place inside him from what had happened to Richard. Nick looked away quickly and swallowed, wondering again if there was something he might have done to have spared Richard, spared Natalie, from the madness that had overtaken the newly-made vampire. "Yes," he admitted, after a moment's pause. Then he met her eyes hopefully. "With your help."

Again, he felt himself measured by her gaze. Janette walked around him, finger to her lips, eyes on him. "With my . . . help. And you would stay and watch over him? Leave your little 'job' if need be? Because that's possible, you know. The new ones must be watched constantly, coached carefully."

"Yes, yes," he agreed, throwing his hands in the air. "Fine. Whatever it takes. Will you do it?"

Janette stopped and took a step toward him-- it took more willpower than he wanted to admit to not back away from her. "Who is he?"

"An artist."

"As you said." Her eyes were suspicious as she brushed past him. "Where did you meet?"

"He's a police sketch artist at the station." When she continued to walk around him, waving her hand in an indication that she wanted more information, he turned in place, following her movements. "There was a botched robbery at a dry-cleaners the other night. He was blinded."

"Ah, yes. So I'd heard -- but not about the blinding." She shook her head when his eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, you needn't be that way. I *do* read the papers and keep abreast of the news, from time to time."

"When it amuses you."

"*Don't* be clever," she scolded, stopping long enough to shake her finger in his face. "You're asking the favor, not me."

He reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. "I know. And I'm grateful."

Janette snatched her hand away quickly. "I haven't said yes, yet." She turned her back to him, looking out over the club. "Tuesday nights are always slow," she said absently. "Almost as bad as Mondays. Alma had some nonsensical idea about putting in a taco bar for happy hour, but I haven't had a yen for Mexican in some time."

Nick moved to stand behind her and placed his arms around her. Automatically, her hands reached up to touch his. "Janette--"

"I'm *thinking*." She glanced sideways at him. "He's some sort of witness, isn't he? Is that why you're

doing it, then? Because you need a witness to finger your 'suspect'?"

"He's already given us a description," said Nick quietly. "And I'd be the last one to want to bring a fledgling into a courtroom packed with mortals. Besides, the trial would be held during the day--"

"Impossible. Yes, I see." But she continued to stare at him, even as he looked out at the club over her shoulder. "Then *why*?"

"Because it's not fair."

When he turned to meet her eyes, he saw the beginning of a smile playing along the line of her lips. "It's . . . not fair?"

He nodded and when he saw her smile widen, added, "He's good. Or will be. There's no reason for this to happen, for him to waste that gift, if I can give his sight back to him. He gave me one of his paintings -- Janette, you should see the *light* in it!"

Her hand reached up to touch his cheek and he saw the vaguest shadow of sorrow in her blue eyes. "And you want to give him eternal darkness, instead?"

The words were almost an echo of Natalie's and that sameness scared him. Releasing her, he took a step backward. "If you won't--"

"I didn't say that." Janette stood where she was, hands resting lightly on either shoulder, as if his arms were still around her. "I need to understand, I think, why this is so important to you. There are so many injustices, so many things you see that are 'not fair.' I need to know why this one is different."

"He asked to see my paintings."

It sounded so stupid, so insipid. Nick winced and half-turned, expecting to get the same reaction he'd gotten from Natalie.

From Janette there was only a moment's pause. She turned her head as her hands fell away from him, her eyes *not* holding derision, or sarcasm, or contempt. "Did he?" she asked softly. "Did he see them?"

Nick shook his head and looked down at the floor. "No -- there wasn't time. It was only last night. I promised to set something up sometime next week. But . . ."

Janette walked toward him, her steps slow. When she was close enough, she placed one arm around him, hugging him, then tilted his head toward hers by touching the side of his chin. "All right," she said, meeting his eyes. "But we'll set some ground rules. I'm not about to do this alone. I will be his *mama*, but you *will* be his *papa*. You needn't give up your life just yet . . . we'll see how it goes. But if you fail to fulfill your part of the bargain, Nicola, I'll destroy him. And it will be a *very* long time before I'll speak to you, if ever again. Do you understand?"

In response, he leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers, his arms moving around her, pulling her close. There wasn't any necessity for breath and life had passed them by, but with that kiss he promised to uphold his end of the bargain.

Oddly enough, she pulled back first, her blue eyes opening and staring into his. She moved her hand

lightly along the side of her neck. "If I'd known you were going to be so grateful, I might have agreed sooner. You must make these things clear in future, Nicola. There should be no misunderstandings between us over this."

But before he could kiss her lips, or that tender spot on her neck that she had bared, Janette slipped out of his grasp. Her hand fluttered at her neck, adjusting her choker. "If he's been injured, he should be brought across soon, before his body acclimates to the injury. Tonight?"

Nick hesitated, remembering Natalie's objections, then brushed them aside. "Tomorrow night," he corrected. "He's still an eyewitness, which means he's under guard. And he's in the hospital."

Janette's eyes narrowed. "You're not going to make this easy, are you?" But then she turned away, waving her hand. "No -- never mind. All right. Tomorrow night. I'll trust you to come up with a plan, you were always good at that. You may come for me here."

Again, he stepped up behind her, kissing her bared neck lightly. "You won't regret it."

Before he could move away, she caught his hair with her hand and met his eyes, holding him in place. "See that I don't," she warned. Then, smiling slightly, she turned her gaze back to the dance floor and released him. "Nicola -- one last thing. Is he handsome?"

"Would you trust me to judge?"

She cast a disdainful glance over her shoulder at him and sniffed. "No," she decided after a second's pause. "But if he's ugly, I won't do it."

"You'll do it," said Nick, seeing the glimmer of humor beneath the callous look in her eyes. "You'll do it for me."

"For you?" Janette raised an eyebrow, then her lips curled into a slight smile. "Yes. Perhaps. For you."

It was as much of a polite dismissal as he was going to receive. He went back to kiss her neck again, then ran for the door as she gasped aloud in astonishment and mock-outrage. Once outside he felt like flying, his heart was so light within him. And, if the Caddy hadn't been waiting there and his shift not yet half over, he might very well have taken to the sky.

But he slipped behind the wheel and turned the key in the ignition. He wouldn't let Kevin be left alone in the dark, as he'd been. Kevin *would* have the light again, even if he had to settle for city streetlights and stars, instead of the blazing sun.

* * *

The chains had enough slack so that he could sit. After a time, Nicholas did so; his knees gave way, so that he sank down against the wooden floor, then back against the cool stone of the wall.

And all the while he watched the light as it moved along the floor, the dawn becoming morning and the morning stretching toward noon. The dark, stained wood changed as the light passed over it, glowing glossy and new for some short time, warmed by the glow.

He'd never sat and watched the light before. Not like this. Not when he was alive, certainly, when light had meant work to be done, men to be killed, ground to be fought over and won . . . or lost. The night had

been a time of rest, of cleaning weapons in the field and finding food where one could until the body would simply refuse to move any more and sleep blended darkness into the first pale stirrings of day.

Nor after he'd passed into this life of endless night had the light been anything but a curse-- something that could harm him, kill him. It was right that he should fear the brilliance of the sun, for he was damned and a creature of the dark. But when he began to doubt that salvation was beyond him, when he began to have hope that perhaps the light he'd squandered to obtain this hellish existence wasn't gone for eternity as he'd thought, the light had changed again.

There was a cold place within him, in the center of his being, in his soul. As Nicholas watched the light he felt it waken, felt it stir. And there was nothing more important to him at that moment than to touch the light, to prove to himself that there would be a time when even his too-flawed flesh would not burn. ~

Eyeing the chain, he eased the slack of it down to the cuff on his arm. He reached forward, kneeling, then lying full length upon the floor. At first he was too far away, but he crawled like a worm on his stomach, kicking away from the wall until the chain attached to his ankle would let him move closer. Then he looked ahead, to the light.

It was beyond him still, no matter how hard he strained and stretched the muscles of his arm, the sinews that bound his fingers to his hand. A low moan escaped him as he realized that he could move no farther and he dropped his forehead to the old wood and closed his eyes, feeling that cold place within him unfurl in the darkness.

Nicholas rolled over on his side, the strength gone from him. The struggle with LaCroix and the fact that he hadn't fed for days, or so it seemed, left him weary, without resource. He simply had nothing left with which to try.

When all seemed hopeless, he realized that the light was still moving toward him. No more than a few grained sections of floor at a time, but it *was* still moving.

Again, he scrambled onto his stomach, reaching as far as he could. The rough metal cuff cut into his wrist again, scraping open and deepening the tears in his skin. But not even the scent of the blood could distract him, as he fixed his eyes, his gaze, his being on the light.

Seconds and minutes became hours; his muscles cramped, uncramped, and cramped again. There was no such thing as time and if it did exist, it didn't touch him. Through sheer power of will Nicholas refused to move, the twitch of his fingers toward the light the only sign of life his body could or would muster. It seemed so close, he could almost feel the warmth on his fingertips, the glow from the dim winter sun seeming brighter than a fireball on the darkest night. He dared to smile in hope, dared to pray for moments on end, as the light seemed so near.

But then he knew the truth -- that the sun had passed its zenith and had gone beyond the range of the window. The square of light was moving away from him. Slowly, yes, but it *was* edging back toward the window, beyond his grasp.

His last effort was the mightiest of all. With a cry of rage he flung himself against the chains, across the floor. Bones snapped in his foot, even beneath the protection of the leather boot, as he drew upon every link of slack he could find. His wrist and arm bled freely, the red drying brown and staining his shirt and coat in streaks where his flesh rubbed against the cloth or where the cloth rubbed against the dirty floor. The numbness of his soul drowned out the pain of the flesh, but still he tried to reach the light.

And failed.

With a sob, Nicholas relaxed, his face resting on his arm. The chain pulled him back slightly as his muscles ceased to strain, but to be an inch, or a foot, or a league from the light, it was all the same. He clutched his arms around his chest, rolling back into the dark, cold corner against the wall and cried not as would a child who'd been denied a favorite toy, but as a man from whom hope and all joy had been wrenched away, whether by war, or nature, or God. As the blood tears slipped down his cheeks, the wetness absorbed by his skin and then spilling again from his eyes, he turned his face to the wall.

After having failed so miserably, Nicholas couldn't bear to see the light. Nor could he bear the light seeing him, in his disgrace.

* * *

"Too much detergent?" asked Schanke.

Nick paused at his desk and raised an eyebrow. Schanke pointed to his Nick's shirt cuff, the way he was rubbing his hand around his left wrist. "That's what happened the last time Myra changed detergents. Chaffed for a week. And the rash I got--"

"Let's leave that to the imagination, shall we?" said Nick lightly. He leaned his palms on Schanke's desk and looked over the files, fighting back the urge to scratch his wrist again. "What have we got?"

"Not a hell of a lot, even with Kevin's description." Schanke opened a folder and placed it flat on the desk. The photo inside was of the suspect killed at the scene of the crime. "We've still got no ID on our friend here."

"Which means we're not likely to get anything on his partner until we do."

Schanke mimed a gun with his thumb and forefinger. "Bingo." He stretched and leaned back in his chair as Nick picked up the file. "I've spent half the day doing legwork-- checked the basketball courts, places the tough kids hang out." When Nick hesitated, Schanke frowned. "Geez, didn't you listen to what you put out over the wire -- high school basketball shirt? Could be nothing, but--"

"Could be something," finished Nick. He turned and leaned against the desk, still reading the file. "Yeah. You're right. Sorry, I'm a little distracted." He flipped past the page in the file that dealt with the cause of death, concentrating on the details of clothing, anything that might be considered a clue. "Nothing from Chicago?"

"Lines have been down part of the day -- they lost a transformer. Other than that, we're still waiting for them to ID Kevin's description of the T-shirt, give us a high school to work with; something." He gestured toward the file. "Since his prints are clean, my guess is the stiff was strictly small time, local stuff. His buddy probably has some heavy paper somewhere -- just a matter of finding it."

"Still no word on where they were staying?"

Schanke shrugged as Nick looked at him, then rose to his feet. "Not that I could find. Figure they were a couple of tourists looking to make a quick score."

Nick tossed the file onto the desk. "Thought maybe I'd check out some contacts tonight, flash the picture and see what comes back."

"The 'Joe Cool' shtick?" Schanke mimed tossing a basketball and asked, "Maybe shoot a few hoops?"

"If it helps."

"I've dented a few backboards in my time," said Schanke. "South side, North side, it's a city game -- don't need a lot of room, just some tar and a net. And sometimes just the hoop. Not the way these kids play it," he added scornfully. "B-ball was down and dirty, one-on-one, in your face." He shook his head as he glanced back at the file on his desk. "That on e-- he's got the look to him. Lousy break for the kid if he was a small timer. Sometimes they just get in with the wrong crowd, you know?"

"I know," Nick answered, rubbing his wrist again. Catching himself, he frowned and planted both palms on the desk, supporting his weight. "Shouldn't waste your time on a punk like that. He knew what he was getting into."

"And Kevin didn't."

Nick winced and looked away. "That's the way it is, now, isn't it? The suspect gets the sympathy and the headlines. The victim gets a pine box."

"That's why we call 'em 'victims,'" said Schanke. "Yeah, we'll nail the guy who did this to Kevin. Maybe we'll even put him away for a while. But a gun and a badge can't bring back Kevin's sight. So . . . we do what we can and hope it's enough."

"And if it isn't?"

Schanke's smile was grim. "Then we do more. Until we've done all we can. Then we go home, kiss the wife, and try to read the sports scores around the coupons she's cut out of the paper." He tapped Nick on the shoulder on his way toward the squad room door. "Make a foul shot for me."

"Thanks. My best to Myra." Nick picked up the files from Schanke's desk, dropped them on his own, then looked up at the clock. He had a few hours to go before Janette would expect him at the Raven. Making some pointless calls and checking dead-end leads weren't his idea of a fun evening, but it would keep him busy. If he was busy, he wouldn't have a chance to think about what he planned to do.

He didn't *want* to think about what he planned to do.

In fact, the hours passed quickly. Nick ended up grabbing his jacket and running out the door to the Caddy, a phone call to a youth hostel taking longer than expected to turn into a false lead. He didn't dare keep Janette waiting, not when she'd been so hesitant in agreeing to help him.

When she drove into the alley beside the Raven, she was waiting at the service entrance. The long black cloak and hood she wore allowed her to blend into the shadows and he might not have spotted her at all had she not raised her pale hand imperiously at him, as someone of wealth might signal a taxi from the street. He pulled the Caddy alongside her and had his hand on the buckle of his seatbelt, fully intending to get out to open the door for her -- Janette was a great follower of the formality of things and his not opening a car door at the right time might cause her to change her mind.

How surprised he was when she opened the car door, slipped inside like an elegant shadow, and gestured over her shoulder, toward the street. "Drive."

"But--?"

"Drive." As she pointed, her cloak slipped and he caught the gleam of pure white beneath the dark covering. She let out a hiss at him and hurriedly covered herself again.

Nick knew enough not to press his luck. Leaning his arm on the top edge of the front seat, he turned his head and reversed the car out of the alley and into the street. Only when they'd gone several blocks from the Raven did Janette seem to relax, slumping against the seat of the car, the back of her hand held dramatically to her forehead. "I thought I'd *never* get out of there." Then she turned her sharp blue eyes on him. "You're *late*!"

"I know, I'm sorry," said Nick, his eyes on the road as he steered the Caddy into traffic. "I was on a call--"

"You're very lucky I didn't decide to write off this whole adventure," countered Janette, eyes flashing. "And I still might. This *costume* you've provided is . . . bothersome."

The cloak had slipped down to her shoulders and he could now see the starched nurse's cap and uniform that he'd stolen from the hospital on his way to work that evening. "Doesn't it fit?"

"It fits well enough, thank you. But white is *not* my color. If Alma or any of the others had seen me in this, well, it would be *centuries* before I could show my face in the club again." She sniffed haughtily and added, "Wipe that smirk off your face."

"I'm not--" It was no use protesting -- he *was* smiling and couldn't help himself. In response, she straightened in her seat and stared out the side window, ignoring him.

Sobering, Nick kept his eyes on the traffic. The last thing he wanted was Janette angry with him. "They'll expect to see me there -- I've been by twice since last night-- but you have to blend in. We agreed--"

"I didn't agree to *this*. But . . . I *did* leave the planning up to you." Sighing, she raised a hand to the hat, tapping hairpins into place as she checked herself in the car's mirror. Janette flipped back the sunshade in annoyance. "At least you got the size right." Then, her vanity intact, she smiled and raised her hand to her lips, hiding a laugh. "But it is a lovely conceit, dressing as an 'angel of mercy.'"

Nick knew he was safe when she brushed his shoulder with her hand. "How clever of you," she cooed. And then, again, she was all business -- well, almost -- as she straightened and slipped the cloak from her shoulders, revealing the white uniform. He gave her an approving glance -- it *did* fit well -- and she threw back her head and batted her eyelashes coquettishly. "Do you think your artist will be pleased?"

Her comment brought him back to earth, and the matter at hand. He looked at the road. "I told you -- he's been blinded."

"Oh, yes. I'd forgotten. Still -- it's only temporary." She patted her hair absently. "I suppose you'll want this done quickly, with a minimum of fuss. A pity, if he's as handsome as you say . . ."

Nick swallowed. They had only ten, perhaps fifteen minutes to the hospital and he had to make her understand-- "Janette, there's something we should talk about."

She paused in mid-movement and turned cold eyes toward him. "I told you, Nicola, if he's ugly I won't turn him."

He shook his head. "No -- not that. It's just . . . I want to give him a choice."

"A . . . choice?" Janette gazed at him, blue eyes wide. "Between . . . you and me?"

"No. About being brought across." He glanced over at her, knowing that he was in trouble by the beginnings of a frown that hovered at the edges of her lips. "I want him to make his own decision. He has to know everything, he has to *agree*, before--"

He couldn't finish the sentence. Janette was still watching him, her eyes guarded. "This was *not* part of the deal."

"I know. But I want Kevin to be certain. I want him to know." He looked at her again, taking his eyes off the road for a moment only. "I *need* him to know, need him to make the choice."

Those words remained unspoken as well -- that he felt he'd been tricked into accepting LaCroix's deal, seduced by Janette into a situation he didn't understand. But she knew, as she often did, what he couldn't or wouldn't say. And Janette leaned back against the seat, pulling away from him slightly. "What will you say?" she asked, after a moment's pause.

"What will *you* say?" he corrected. "He can't know I'm there -- not unless he's willing to go through with it. I can't risk it."

She glared at him. "Well, I'm not dealing with this alone. I told you--"

"I'll be there," said Nick quickly. He reached for her hand and caught it, squeezing it to reassure her. "He's only mortal -- he won't hear me. I can tell you what to say for the most part. But you have to tell him everything. He has to know before he makes a choice."

He thought for sure she'd back out. Her eyes were filled with fire and she turned her head away quickly, neck stiff and straight. Janette looked down at her hand in his, tracing the line of his finger. And, for a moment, he thought he saw some hesitation in her. "All right," she relented, her voice soft. "If that's what you wish. But you know that if he decides not to accept my . . . offer--"

"You'll make him forget," said Nick firmly, staring at the windshield.

"He's blind, or so you told me." As he pulled his hand from hers, she held onto it, leaning on him and placing her free hand at the back of his neck. "The eyes are the window to the mind. We can't control him if he can't see." Releasing his hand, she smacked him smartly on the cheek. "You must think these things through."

Nick swallowed, staring at the road, his mind racing to find some answer to the problem she'd just presented. "But -- he doesn't know you. He'd never--"

"He'd know of our existence. That's danger enough. And I don't want *them* after me for being careless. No, not even for you, Nicola." Janette rested her head on his shoulder, her arms around him as he drove. "I'll make the offer, if you wish. And I'll bring him across if he agrees, just as you want. But if he says no, he must die. Tonight." Raising her head, she pressed a kiss on his cheek. "Those are my terms. If you don't like them, drop me off here. I wouldn't be caught dead walking into the Raven dressed like this."

It had been too easy to convince her. And she'd gone along with the idea of Kevin having a choice . . . he

should have suspected a catch. "Why?" Nick asked, after a moment's pause.

"Because I'm not certain you'll go through with this." When he moved his head slightly to meet her gaze, she smiled and touched her finger to his lips. "Not that I disapprove. I think it's a charming idea. It might even help you to-- what do they call it now? Find yourself?" Then her smile faded and Janette pulled back from him, returning to her seat. "I've warned you, I've no intention of doing this alone. However fond I am of you, Nicola, I won't put myself in danger to entertain one of your whims. Now, your answer? Yes or no. I *do* have a club to run, although Wednesdays are about as lively as Tuesdays. Oh, why can't every night be Saturday night?"

It was that easy for her -- to discuss death of a man in one breath and moan about the lack of club-goers on a week night in the next. Nick knew that part of her callous facade was just that . . . pretense. But he also knew that when push came to shove, Janette cared first and foremost for the continued survival of herself above all others.

And she was waiting for his answer, eyes narrowed, lips drawn into a thin line.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"Good." Reaching behind her, she drew her cloak into place, almost disappearing as she adjusted the hood over her hat and hair. "The back entrance, I think. And *do* hurry when you get inside; this dress is very drafty and I hate waiting on windowsills. It seems so . . . morbid." Smiling, she placed her hand on his arm. "Don't look so glum, Nicola. Be happy for your friend. *Our* friend."

He forced a smile for her benefit as he pulled the car into the rear parking lot, toward a quiet section of the building. But when he looked into her eyes, they were the same as they'd been so many nights ago when she'd first lured him from the light.

And that cold place inside him, that had remained with him even after he'd awakened this evening, grew just a little colder, and darker, and wider.

Chapter 7

Nick took the steps two at a time, the noise echoing in the empty stairwell. He paused at the doorway to the third floor and listened. There were a number of sounds ranging from conversation between the nurses, to the beeps and humming of machinery, to the coughs and groans and moans of the patients.

It was late enough for visiting hours to be over. He'd checked in with the station by radio, letting them know that he was at Mercy Faith checking out a lead -- better that he have an alibi in case his car was spotted in the parking lot. Getting through security was less of a maze than Monday night, but this time he avoided following the visitor's route through the hospital and took to the stairs at the far side of the building. His badge got him past the security personnel at the entry to the lower staircase and he didn't remember seeing anyone stationed at the stairwells or elevators on the third floor -- sloppy work on someone's part. He'd remember for next time.

If there was ever going to be a next time. Each time he flashed his badge to a uniformed officer or hospital security, it was a little tougher to force the smile and acknowledgment, to mutter the few words of passing, the small talk that was required. Janette had warned that he might have to withdraw from his life among mortals to adequately get Kevin through the transition period, but that he could continue his chosen

profession for the moment. Right now he didn't think he'd be able to stand in the squad room and go through the motions of a his job knowing that he'd not only assisted, but *arranged* Kevin's murder.

Nick wasn't certain how he was going to get past the guard at the door -- a little mental suggestion that the officer had to visit the men's room, with an additional command to forget that he'd seen Detective Knight would have been his first option. But as he made his way out of the stairwell and down the brightly lit corridor, ducking once down a hall to avoid being spotted as an orderly passed by with a patient on a gurney, he noticed that the guard was missing.

For a second he paused, looking either way. There was no one there. Turning his attention on the room, Nick listened and heard breathing -- the quiet, rhythmic sound of sleep. He turned the knob, opened the door and slipped into the room.

It was dark and smelled of antiseptic and medication, the hospital security lights providing only the faintest glow through the slats of the blinds. He noticed the pattern of light seemed to be interrupted -- trust Janette to dismantle the few lights that might reveal her presence. His steps were certain as he crossed the floor, passing the bed and making his way to the window, for he could see better in the dark than by any artificial light. But he was careful as he moved, not wanting to waken Kevin too soon. Better to let him sleep in peace for a few moments more.

Again he paused, just as he reached the window. Nick turned to look at Kevin, who was lying with one arm thrown across the bandages that covered his eyes. For some reason he thought of the disappointment in Natalie's eyes when he'd admitted what he'd planned to do, of her warning that giving Kevin back his sight wasn't worth the loss of his life. And the coldness within him stirred as he remembered desperately stretching his fingers across that wooden floor, seeking the barest touch of warm sunlight . . .

A tap at the window startled him and he shook away the dark thoughts -- Janette sensed that he was there and wasn't about to wait any longer. Carefully, Nick pushed aside the blinds and opened the window. It was louvered and slid upwards and outwards, then Janette pulled it from his hands and placed it to one side. Her dark cloak slid to the floor as she leaned inside and he held her hands, helping her to the floor.

"You took your time," she scolded, in a stage whisper.

"Sssh!" Nick put a finger to his lips and gestured toward the bed. Then he reached outside to pick up the twisted bit of the window frame and bent it temporarily into place, tossing her cloak back onto the ledge. "Be careful, you'll wake him."

He kept his voice low, so quiet that even a conscious mortal wouldn't have heard him. But Janette heard him well enough. "That's the idea, isn't it? To wake him?" She tiptoed toward the bed and tilted her head, trying to get a look at Kevin. "Hmmm, he *is* handsome. It would be better if I took him now --"

Before she could lean down toward the bed, he was beside her, his hand on her shoulder. "Remember your promise," he said sternly. "Kevin will choose -- you won't force the issue."

"And remember *your* promise." Her eyes sparkled angrily in the darkness. "If he doesn't want to come across, he dies. I don't care whether you kill him or I, but I'll warn you, Nicola, that I will *not* be in a good mood."

They both looked up as Kevin stirred, his arm moving from his face and resting on his chest. Nick noted that he was no longer hooked up to the IV -- he hadn't visited Kevin since Monday, despite the fact that

he'd checked in with the doctor and the nurses. Looking at Kevin, hearing his heart beat steady and strong, Nick froze in place as he again began to doubt -- was he was doing the right thing?

Amoyed at his hesitation, Janette pushed him back. "Stay there and stay quiet," she instructed softly. "I'll handle this." She seated herself lightly on the bed as Nick stepped away, to the other side. Gently, she traced the line of Kevin's neck with her fingernails, resting her hand on his cheek.

He turned his head from side to side, then started awake, jerking up from the pillow. With the barest pressure on his shoulder, Janette pushed him back to the bed, murmuring, "Sssh! It's all right, Kevin. It's all right."

His hand reached to catch hers when it rested on his shoulder. "Who are you? Do I know you?" His voice was hoarse, but it was intelligible.

"A friend sent me," said Janette, in a soothing tone of voice. "I'm here to help you."

Kevin turned his head away, unknowingly exposing his neck. Janette looked back at Nick over her shoulder, the faintest of gold gleaming in her eye, but he frowned. She merely smiled and ran her knuckles down the side of his neck lightly, as he moaned, "No one can help me."

"I can." Nick took a step toward the bed as Janette leaned closer to Kevin, but she was moving to whisper in his ear, not to attack him. "I can give you back your eyes, your sight."

Kevin turned his head quickly, Nick saw his hand tighten around Janette's, but she made no sound or gave any outward appearance that his grip hurt her. "You're lying."

"No. I *can* help you. I can give you back your eyes."

Nick saw Kevin's Adam's apple move convulsively, heard the young man's heart skip a beat. "No," he insisted. "I'm dreaming. I must be dreaming--"

"In a way, you are," said Janette. She placed her hands to either side of his face and kissed each cheek lightly. "But I can make your dream come true. I can make you see again."

His hand rose from hers to her face, then the other hand rose as well. It was a familiarity Janette did not lightly allow in any circumstance, but she caught Kevin's hands in her own and guided them over her features -- her eyes, the line of her face, the curve of her neck and the softness of her cheek.

"You *are* real," he whispered. When she released his hands, he rested one on her neck and ran the other gently along her profile. "I would have loved to have drawn you. You're . . . beautiful."

Janette backed away from his touch and half-rose from the bed. She turned her head toward Nick and he saw a look of desolation on her face, before she glanced away and muttered, "I can't," so quietly that Kevin couldn't hear.

But Nick heard. He fought back his astonishment to take another step toward her. "You *promised*," he answered, in as quiet a voice. "You have to tell him."

"Where are you?" asked Kevin. He pushed himself to a sitting position in the bed and reached out his hands. "Where did you go?"

Janette looked back at Kevin as she moved away from the bed. "I can't. Either let me take him or let me go. I won't do it again. Not like this."

Nick grabbed her arm roughly, then realized what he'd done and lessened his grip as he turned her to face Kevin again. "Let him choose," he whispered to her. "Tell him all of it and let him choose."

"Are you gone?" asked Kevin, his voice rising in panic. "Don't leave me! Please? Don't leave me in the dark."

For a moment, Nick froze. He looked to Janette and saw her staring at him, eyes wide. Then something seemed to change in her gaze, something hardened. "And if he doesn't want it, *you* 'll have to kill him," she said quietly. "Do you understand that?"

"Tell him," was all he could reply, releasing her. He pushed her gently toward the bed. "Tell him."

Janette caught one of Kevin's hands and sank down on the hospital bed again. "Sssh!" she soothed, pressing him back against the pillow. "I'm here. I haven't left you. I'm here."

There was a loud beeping from inside Nick's coat pocket. He nearly jumped out of his skin as he fumbled for the cellular phone in his jacket.

"What was that?" asked Kevin, trying to rise.

Janette pushed him down again, saying, "Nothing. It's all right. It's nothing." Then she glared up at Nick.

"I'll be in -- the-uh--" he gestured toward the small bathroom as he backpedaled across the room. He waved his hand at Janette. "Don't do any--"

But she was whispering to Kevin softly, her voice soothing, promising him his sight, his eyes. Kevin's responses were muffled, disbelieving . . . but his voice was tinted with desperation and hope. Knowing that he had barely a minute or two to spare before Janette's predatory instincts took over, Nick closed the bathroom door behind him and answered the phone. "Knight here."

"We've been trying to get you on the radio," asked Schanke's voice. "Where the hell are you?"

"At the hospital." It wasn't quite a lie and it would do as well as any other. "Keep your voice down," he said, in a hushed tone. "There are sick people here. And what are you calling for -- you're off shift!"

"I'm back on -- Captain called, he said the word came in from Chicago. We got faxed photos and a rap sheet longer than my arm coming in on our suspect. Kevin's description and the T-shirt nailed it. Look, I'm just around the block. I'll meet you there. Hasta--"

"No, Schanke, no--". But the dial tone sounded. Nick replaced the phone in his jacket and bit back on a few choice swear words. He opened the bathroom door and looked out into the room.

Janette was still whispering to Kevin. She looked up at him, an eyebrow raised.

"We have to call it off for tonight," said Nick softly. "Schanke's on his way here--"

"Tonight," she answered, eyes like steel. "Now . . . or never."

As she tilted back her head, he saw her fangs in place again. Nick moved to her side and grabbed her shoulder, whispering, "Tell him."

One of Kevin's hands was still in her own, their fingers entwined. Janette glared at Nick over her shoulder, then leaned forward, kissing Kevin's lips lightly. "I can give you your eyes," she said softly. "I can give you the night. Eternal night. You'll never grow old or ugly. You'll be strong -- stronger than any ten mortal men. No one could hurt you like this again. Your senses will be keen -- sharper than any mortal." She ran her fingers down the side of his face and his neck -- Nick saw the gold return to her eyes. "You're beautiful and you'll remain so, forever. Time won't touch you. And you'll have your sight and your art."

Kevin's mouth opened, his breathing was ragged and his heart beat fast. He raised his free hand to Janette's face, caressing her cheek, pulling her back to his lips, finally muttering, "How? What do I do?" between kisses.

Nick was well aware of Janette's brand of magic -- he wasn't about to allow Kevin to be seduced, to be duped as he himself had been, so many centuries again. Squeezing lightly on Janette's shoulder -- he'd left his hand there in case she got too carried away -- he said sternly, "Tell him *everything*."

Again she broke from Kevin and glared at him, annoyance tinting the gold of her eyes, her lips curling back over her fangs in a silent snarl. But Nick met her glare evenly, feeling his own eyes go gold and she looked away, across the darkened room.

Then Janette turned her attention back to Kevin. She pulled his other hand from around her neck, so that she held both of his hands in her own. "Listen," she said softly. "Listen carefully and I'll tell you. I can take you into the darkness--" Kevin's lips mouthed a 'yes,' but Janette moved her hand, clasped with his, to his mouth. "No, wait -- you must know everything before you choose. Once you enter the dark, you'll never be safe in the light. The sun will burn you, destroy you. You'll live at night, an eternity of nights."

She hesitated and Nick leaned down, whispering, "Everything."

"You can be hurt by fire," she continued. "It can destroy you. And crosses, some holy objects might harm you." Kevin was kissing her fingers. She released his hand and slapped him lightly on the cheek. "Listen to me. Or I'll leave."

"Don't leave," said Kevin, almost in a panic. He reached out to touch her arm and she entwined her fingers with his again.

"Then listen!" Her voice lost some of its whispery quality and she glared at Nick. "You'll be tied to me for eternity, and don't think that will be entirely pleasant -- I have my moods," she warned, as Kevin smiled. "You'll have to leave your friends and family, never see them or contact them again. They'll believe you are dead -- which you *will* be."

And then something in Kevin's expression changed -- his lips twisted in a frown and he turned his head slightly. "Gina?" he whispered.

Janette shifted on the bed, half-turning to look at Nick.

"His fiancée," he supplied.

Thunderclouds gathered in her eyes, which were now blue instead of gold. "You never said anything about a--"

Nick swallowed, but cut off her fierce whisper with two words, "Tell him."

"What about Gina?" asked Kevin.

Janette dropped one of his hands and caressed his face lightly. "She'll be lost to you, if you truly love her. If you touch her, kiss her, make love to her, you might kill her. Or make her like yourself -- and you won't have that kind of control for some time. This is how we make our children, we bring others into the darkness. If you come with me, you can never have mortal children." Before he could do more than form the words with his lips, she touched her finger to his nose and trailed it down his chin, to his neck. "We live on blood, Kevin. We feed on mortals. We're careful in these modern days, but even now we kill upon occasion. Although *some* of us feed from the blood of animals," she looked at Nick again, "we survive on human blood."

Nick met her gaze and nodded at the question in them -- yes, she'd covered most of it. There was something in the way she looked at him, sought his approval, that reminded him of the way she'd often looked to LaCroix. It was a thought to painful to be endured -- that he might be doing as Natalie said, bringing Kevin across into the darkness just as he had been brought across.

Closing his eyes, he told himself that he hadn't been given a choice, he hadn't known the true cost of what was being offered. He told himself that now that Kevin knew, it was up to Kevin to make the decision--not him. He'd guide Kevin, help him to adjust if he chose to be brought across, but he'd never be his 'master.' Not like LaCroix.

Never like LaCroix.

When he opened his eyes, he found Janette had leaned close to Kevin. "Do you understand?" she asked. "Tell me that you understand what I'm offering you."

"You're -- you're a vam-vampire?"

"Yes," hissed Janette sitting upright, almost proudly. "Yes, I am. And that's what I want to give you, Kevin. You can have your sight back. And more--" Her fingers slipped down the curve of his face and Nick heard Kevin's heart skip a beat, he could smell a mixture of fear and excitement in Kevin's sweat. "So much more," whispered Janette, leaning down to bush her lips against his ear and down the side of his throat. Kevin's hand grasped hers tightly as she nipped his skin lightly with her teeth. "But you must choose," she continued, brushing her lips against his ear again. "I won't take you with me unless you want this. And once you agree, there's no way back."

Nick's hand tightened involuntarily on Janette's shoulder. She met his gaze, eyes angry at the interruption, but then her blue eyes softened. Her hand moved from Kevin and reached across her shoulder, to cover his. Her eyes, for that moment, were almost kind. And her smile was sympathetic.

He wanted to break from her and turn away, to flee this place and return only after what might be done was done. Her words had echoed so much of what he'd been and said over the centuries, so many of the limitations he'd had to discover for himself. He thought that telling Kevin everything outright would make a difference -- but how could words encompass the yearning for the light, for salvation? How could a sentence make him understand the pain of loves he wouldn't dare pursue or, in following his heart,

destroy? There was so much more unsaid, so many things that Kevin needed to know.

And so many things he could only know after his soul had been wrenched from his body, until he'd felt the first trickle of blood tears down his cheeks, until he'd spent a day stretched across a floor, fingers reaching in vain for a small and forever distant ray of light . . .

But Janette had said all that she could say. He could delay this moment no longer. No matter what Kevin had been told, no matter how hard he'd tried to make this Kevin's choice, Kevin's responsibility, Nick knew he'd carry a good share of this burden for eternity.

Fighting back his dark thoughts, he forced himself to meet Janette's gaze . . . and to nod.

Sliding her fingers from Nick's hand, she looked to Kevin again. Her blood-red nails lightly traced the line of his knuckles, as she said, "There's not much time. You have to choose, Kevin. Do you want me to take you into the darkness? Do you want your sight returned?"

Kevin turned his head from side to side, his voice weak and strained. "I don't -- I don't know--"

Both he and Janette heard the sound of the doorknob slowly turning. In the blink of an eye, she was gone from the bed, melting into the shadows beside a bureau. Nick slipped around the bed and stepped back into the bathroom. Leaving the door open a crack, he peered through the opening at the hinges.

He expected the returned police officer, checking to make certain nothing had happened since he'd left his station, or even a nurse or the doctor. The man who entered made no move to turn on the light, but he didn't seem at all at ease in the dark. He stood with his back to the door and closed it as Kevin sat up in bed, calling, "Are you here? Did you leave?"

Nick's night vision was perfect enough for him to identify the visitor -- he fit Kevin's description of the second suspect. There was a gun in his hand and his finger was on the trigger. Nick reached for his own gun and withdrew it slowly from his holster, but he didn't dare move. There was still a chance the suspect might shoot Kevin.

"Are you here?" asked Kevin. He tossed aside the blankets and felt for the edge of the bed.

"Don't move!" ordered the suspect, walking into the center of the room, gun raised slightly. "Man, what does it take to kill you?"

Kevin froze, his head tilting slightly to one side. His hand gripped the bedclothes. "It's -- it's you, isn't it? You're the one--?"

The suspect let out a rough laugh, ignoring the anger in Kevin's voice. "Yeah. The word was right -- you're stone-blind, man. I got a gun, so keep it quiet." He moved forward again, toward the bed, Kevin freezing in place as he'd been told. "Why couldn't you've just died like the others? Coulda skipped this hole and gone somewhere else. Guess I'm gonna have to finish you, first."

Nick watched as Kevin's hands grabbed the covers behind him, bunching them together. He looked shaky, but he was trying to find some leverage, some weapon that he could use to protect himself. "You gonna shoot me?" asked Kevin, his voice cracking.

"Yeah, and every cop in this place'll be on my case," snarled the suspect, moving toward the head of the bed, his back to Nick. He reached out and grabbed the pillow with his free hand. "You just be cool and

this'll be all over, okay?"

His eyes on the gun, Nick waited until the killer tucked the weapon into the back of his jeans waistband, placing both hands on the pillow with the intention of smothering Kevin. Slamming his weight against the door, Nick moved out into the room, gun drawn, crying, "Metro Police! Hold it right there!"

The slam of the door was as loud as a gunshot. The suspect jumped, just as Kevin threw the blanket. It missed the suspect and blinded Nick momentarily. He was pushed to one side as the killer dashed for the door. Nick tore the blanket from his face and shoulder and whirled, gun still in place, expecting a face-off.

Kevin was rising from the floor not far from him, one hand resting on the bed for support -- he looked ready to fall over. The killer had drawn his gun and was backing away toward the door, unaware of Janette's presence behind him -- she'd slipped by him during the confusion. "Okay, okay," said the suspect anxiously. "Let's be cool about this--"

It was as he turned toward the door that Janette backhanded him across the face, her hands clasped together. She let out a shriek as her fists connected with his flesh. The gun went off, the bullet firing high and into the ceiling as the suspect fell.

Instinct kicked in -- Janette snarled, eyes gold and fangs in place as she dove toward the fallen man, but Nick caught her shoulder. "No!" he cried, stopping her. Quickly, he reached to his belt and unclipped his service handcuffs. Flipping the suspect over on his stomach, Nick cuffed the man's hands, then nodded toward the bed. "Kevin--?"

Kevin was half-sitting, half-kneeling by the bed, having dropped to the floor when the gun went off. Janette knelt beside him. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

Kevin turned his head toward her, then back to where Nick was cuffing the suspect. "Nick?" he asked, voice filled with confusion. "Is that you?"

Janette met Nick's gaze. At first she seemed startled, then her eyes narrowed and became cold. Her lips parted, as if she was going to say something.

The hospital room door was slammed to one side, accompanied by a familiar voice calling, "Police!"

It was Schanke. Janette turned quickly, helping Kevin into bed and retrieving the blanket from the floor. She kept her back to the doorway and only Nick could hear her quiet warnings to Kevin. "Be still," she whispered. "Say nothing. I'll return. I promise you. Be still."

Nick raised his hands in the air until Schanke could identify him. "It's okay, Schank -- we got him."

"Got *who*? Nick? How the hell can you see anything in here?"

The light came on and Nick flinched at the sudden brightness, then looked quickly to Janette. She'd gotten Kevin back into bed and was tucking the blankets in around him, still whispering. As Schanke picked up the fallen handgun from the floor, Nick holstered his own gun and then lifted the dazed suspect to his feet. "Here's our perp. Four counts of murder, one count attempted murder."

By this time, the doorway had filled with people. The policeman who was supposed to be on duty appeared and brushed them all outside.

Schanke stared at the suspect, then grinned. "You set him up, didn't you? Without backup? Stonetree's gonna blow a gasket."

"We got him, didn't we?" countered Nick. He pushed the suspect toward Schanke and the man stumbled forward, still woozy from the blow Janette had given him -- there was a livid bruise across his face and his nose was twisted and bleeding, probably broken. "And it wasn't a set-up. I came by to check on Kevin and saw the door unguarded--"

The policeman walked over to Schanke and took the suspect from him. "My fault, detective. They suckered me. A couple of 'em started a fight down the hall, waving a knife around at a nurse. I took off after them." He shook his head. "I dropped the ball."

"We'll talk about that later," said Nick. He gestured toward the suspect. "Just get him out of here. And have somebody clear the hall."

"Those must've been the guys they grabbed on the stairs," said Schanke. "I saw 'em on my way up." He glanced over at the bed and gave a low whistle, then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and transferred the suspect's gun to his other hand in an attempt to protect the evidence. "Nice timing."

"Thanks." Nick swallowed. "Kevin, you okay?"

"Sure . . . Nick," said Kevin's voice, a bit shaky. He was lying flat in the bed, covered with a blanket. One hand was clenched in a fist, while the other rested beneath his head. Janette still hovered there, her back toward them.

Nick walked over toward her, addressing her as he'd treat any another nurse. "If you can leave him now, could you find his doctor for me?"

"Of course, detective," Janette answered. For a brief second he caught a glimpse of gold in her eyes and the tight line of her lips were not to be mistaken -- she was more than a little annoyed at the interruption and he'd hear chapter and verse when he met her outside.

But for the moment she obeyed, walking around Schanke, who was looking at the suspect's gun, then heading out the door and into the hallway. Schanke walked toward the bed, hefting the gun in his hand. "Kevin, you are one lucky hombre." Then he stopped, looked at Nick and glanced over his shoulder toward the door. "Wait a minute -- was that--?"

Nick raised an eyebrow in what he hoped was an innocent expression. "Who?"

"That nurse--?" But when Nick shrugged, Schanke looked down at the gun in his hand again and shook his head. "No. No, it couldn't have been."

Biting back a smile, Nick moved closer to the bed and placed his hand on Kevin's shoulder. "You're okay?"

"Yeah." Kevin took a long, slow breath, then nodded. "Yeah. I -- uh -- I've got a lot to think about."

"It'll come out okay," said Schanke. "You're safe now. We've got that guy locked up and there's no way he's walking on bail." He met Nick's eyes, frowning slightly. "I know it doesn't mean much -- but we're babying this one straight through the Crown Prosecutor and into the courts. We're not gonna let you down."

Kevin's lips formed a slight smile. "Thanks. Both of you."

Nick took a step back from the bed, then looked up at Schanke. Kevin knew he was here, knew he'd been here with Janette. In a way, it would make it easier for him to say what he wanted, to let Kevin know the truth . . . but he'd have to get rid of Schanke if he was going to have a heart-to-heart discussion about the pros and cons of accepting Janette's offer.

The decision was taken from him as Dr. Merrick entered the room at a run. He took in the situation at a glance and before either Nick or Schanke could say anything, pointed toward the door, "Both of you -- out! What the hell's going on here? And what's that gun doing--?"

"It's all right," said Nick, standing his ground as the doctor moved to Kevin's bedside. "Our poisoner showed up here tonight."

Dr. Merrick had grabbed Kevin's wrist -- he looked up quickly at Nick's statement, then over at Schanke. "What?"

"It's true," said Schanke, with a smile. "Just happened my partner was on the scene to stop him."

Dr. Merrick met Nick's eyes. "He's off the streets, then?"

"Yeah."

"Thank God." The doctor glanced down at his watch, then dropped Kevin's wrist. "Kevin?"

"I'm fine," said Kevin, his voice more hoarse than before. "But if Nick hadn't been here--"

"You've been talking." Dr. Merrick glared over his shoulder at Nick and Schanke. "He's been talking. And I thought I told you two to get out?"

"On our way," said Schanke, shooting a 'what the hell do we get paid for anyway?' glance at Nick. "Later, Kevin."

Nick followed in his wake until Kevin called. "Nick? Will you stop by again? With . . . with your friend?"

Dr. Merrick looked up and met Nick's gaze. Nick licked his lips, then nodded. "Sure. Tomorrow. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Check the desk for regular visiting hours," snapped the doctor, as he turned back to Kevin.

They made their way through the nurses and staff that had gathered at the door. There were other security people present, trying to control the situation and the officer who'd been guarding the door would have long since left the building, accompanied by his prisoner.

"What a grouch," commented Schanke. They walked to the elevator and stepped aside as the door opened and several more police officers and security people exited. Both of them received curious glances from the security people, until one of the officers nodded toward them, then said something. A moment later and they had the elevator to themselves.

Schanke rubbed his eyes with his fists. "Can you handle the prelim on this one?"

"Sure," said Nick. "Go home. I'll start the paperwork."

Immediately, Schanke dropped his hand from his eyes and stared. "You're *volunteering* to do the paperwork?"

"Yeah," said Nick defensively, straightening his shoulders. "Like you said -- we're babying this one all the way. Don't worry, I'll make sure all the 'i's are dotted and the 't's crossed. Or don't you trust me to handle it?"

"Oh, I trust you. It's just that a miracle like this doesn't happen more than once in a lifetime," countered Schanke, with a grin. Then, he sobered. "Speaking of miracles -- Kevin was damned lucky you happened by. Unless one of your street contacts told you something was up?"

Nick shrugged again and thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. "I told you, I just wanted to check on him. I know--" he admitted, as Schanke gave him a questioning look, "it was past visiting hours and all, but I wanted to keep an eye on him. It's not a crime."

"You're right -- it's not. And it's nice to know my partner has a sentimental streak."

"Yeah, well, just don't go spreading it around." Nick looked down at the floor, something inside him tightening when he thought of why he'd been in Kevin's room -- 'sentimental' wasn't the word he'd have chosen to describe his intentions or actions. "I'm just glad we got this guy."

"Not that it'll make any difference."

Nick looked up quickly, alarmed by the bitterness in Schanke's tone. "Aren't you the one who said, 'We do what we can'?"

"And we have. We got 'em. *You* got 'em," Schanke corrected himself, as the elevator bell dinged and the door opened. He walked out of the elevator, Nick following. "Kevin knows this guy's locked up and not coming after him. Great. But he's got a hell of a lot of adjustments to make, too. We lock up the perp and Kevin serves the sentence-- blind for life." He yawned as Nick opened the glass exit doors and held them open. "Don't listen to me. I'm beat. You need a lift?"

"I've got the Caddy."

"Yeah. Right." Without a backward glance, Schanke held up his hand in a slight wave as he walked out into the hospital parking lot. "See 'ya tomorrow."

"Yeah." He waited a few minutes, watching as Schanke got into his car and drove away. Then Nick headed for the Caddy. He swallowed around the lump in his throat, Kevin's indecisive, "I don't know," battling with Schanke's, "Kevin serves the sentence -- blind for life." From minute to minute he couldn't be sure whether he was doing the right thing.

But now that he'd started it, there was no turning back.

Nick slowed his steps as he approached the car. It wasn't until he put the key in the lock that he saw Janette stir in the back seat, hidden within the folds of the black cloak she'd retrieved from outside Kevin's window. She glared at him, eyes tinged with gold. "Nicola-- we can't leave this."

"We aren't 'leaving' it." He put the keys in the ignition, closed his door, then turned in his seat to face her. "I spoke with him. Kevin expects us tomorrow night."

She released an exasperated gasp and looked away. "I'm sorry that I ever let you talk me into this."

"It'll give him a chance to think it over," said Nick. "Something I never . . ."

She looked back at him quickly, but he didn't finish. Instead, he straightened in the seat and turned the keys in the ignition. "Where would you like to go?"

"Oh . . . Paris. Milan. Or Venice -- it would be nice to see it again before it sinks entirely beneath the sea."

He shook his head, smiling lightly. "In *Toronto*?"

"I can't go back to the Raven like this." She hesitated. "Just drive. I'll tell you where to turn. I can pick up a change of clothes at a friend's."

"A good friend?"

"I do so like it when you're jealous, Nicola." She leaned her arms on the top of the front seat and rested her chin on them, lifting one hand to tickle the side of his neck with her fingernail.

He tried to ignore the sensation and concentrated on the road ahead. "You'll be ready tomorrow night?"

"Of course. Don't be late again -- I may not be in as good a mood. And there's one thing we haven't decided."

"What?" he asked, daring a glance back at her.

Janette's eyes were wide and cold. "If Kevin decides not to accept our offer -- shall I kill him? Or will you?"

Nick frowned and looked back to the road again, the sudden chill that went through him having less to do with the studied efficacy of Janette's fingernails against his skin than with that cold, dead spot that seemed to have settled permanently around his heart.

* * *

The salt taste of blood brought him back from the darkness. At first it was only a few drops, the touch of a cold finger spreading the liquid on his lips. Mouth dry, tongue swollen, he licked at the blood, a moan rising from within him.

Soft hands cradled his head as he was lifted from the floor. Janette's perfume enveloped him as she held him in her arms. He opened his eyes, which had been crusted shut with tears of dried blood, and raised his hand to wipe them clean.

"Sssh," said Janette softly. She dabbed gently at his eyes and his face with the edge of a scarf that had been dipped in water. "Slowly, Nicola, slowly. Here, I've brought you something to drink."

Carefully, she lifted the ceramic cup to his lips. His fingers fastened around the bowl of it and he gulped

the blood, even as she tried to regulate the flow. He coughed, choking, turning his head away from her. He was too cold, too filled with despair to care. But Janette rested the cup against his cheek and pressed his face toward her, dabbing again at his skin with the scarf.

"There, that's done," said LaCroix's voice, from not so far away. Nicholas heard the sounds of chains clanking and realized there was no longer any pull at his ankle. Hesitantly, he raised his arm and saw the cuff was gone, although the marks where the rough edges had cut and torn his skin were still visible, as was the dried blood that coated and covered his sleeves.

"It will heal," said Janette softly. "But you must drink. If you don't drink, you won't be well again. And what would I do without my Nicola?"

Once he'd tasted the blood, it overpowered him. Nicholas drank, this time getting both of his hands around the cup. Janette made encouraging sounds as he swallowed. It didn't matter whether it was hot or cold, only that it was there. He closed his eyes and, as he drank, he felt some small amount of strength return to him, clearing the cobwebs from his brain.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Janette's face close to his own. Her eyes were darkened with worry and he managed a wan smile for her benefit. In response, she kissed his cheek lightly. "There, Nicola. That's good, yes? A little more to drink and some clean clothes and you'll feel better."

LaCroix squatted down beside her, his cloak still hanging from his shoulders. "I told you he'd be fine."

"He's not *fine*," hissed Janette. "Look what the light did to him."

"He hasn't been burned," said LaCroix smoothly. He reached out a gloved hand to touch Nicholas's hair, withdrawing the hand and smiling as Nicholas drew back from him, hissing. "You can see that for yourself -- the light never touched him. Not as it touched us."

If he'd had the strength, he would have struck LaCroix. But as his body was weak -- the blood-hunger still burning within his veins, lit now by the iron taste upon his lips -- he could do nothing more than pull away and glare, unable even to form the words with which he might fight against his master. Nicholas sank against Janette's softness in resignation and despair, barely making sense of the words that passed by and around him.

Distantly, though, LaCroix's words reached past the deathly languor that had overcome him -- "the light never touched him, not as it touched . . . us"? As he looked at Janette's face, caught the hand with which she stroked his cheek, he discerned a slight difference in her skin. It was as fair as before, but there was a hint of color that had not been there. Nicholas was certain of it and it stirred some hope to life within him. He looked up at her, the question in his eyes, trying to cough up the sound from his dry throat. "D-D-Did--?"

Janette raised his hand to her lips and smiled. "Yes, Nicola, you were right. We walked in the sun. And we didn't burn!"

"You walked--?" He took a breath, then grabbed the cup from her, drinking down the rest of the blood, needing to shrug off the weakness that hung over him, needing to think again. Finished with it, he let it fall from his hand and it shattered on the floor.

"Must you always make such a mess?" asked LaCroix disdainfully. Rising to his feet, he lifted the edges of his cloak and brushed the light dust of the smashed cup from the fabric.

But Nicholas ignored him. He struggled out of her arms and knelt across from Janette. Ignoring the pain from his shattered ankle, he took her hands in his. "You walked in the light?" he managed, after a few false starts.

Her eyes sparkled and she smiled, despite the desperate tone of his question. Impulsively, she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him to her. "Oh, Nicola, it was so *beautiful*. I'd forgotten what it could be like. It was too bright, at first, with the snow," she narrowed her eyes, wincing at the memory. But then a smile graced her lips again. "The ice sparkled from the trees and from the eaves of the buildings. How I wish it had been summer -- the colors we might have seen! We saw children playing -- LaCroix threw a ball of snow at them."

Frowning, LaCroix turned away. "They were in my way," he said. "And they frightened the horses-- little ruffians." Then he looked down at Nicholas, an eyebrow raised. "It seems your friend Faust was right. We *were* able to walk in the sunlight, without harm."

The darkness in which he'd spent the day, that cold, lightless void that had settled around his heart and which he thought would be with him forever, began to shrink back in upon itself as Nicholas heard Janette's words, saw LaCroix's reaction.

They'd walked in the light.

He hadn't, but... for *any* of their kind to have walked in the light was a miracle. The taste of victory was bitter after his day in chains, his imprisonment from the light. But even then, he'd won. In some small way, he'd actually *won*.

Janette touched his cheek with her fingers, taking back his attention. "I was only sorry that you weren't there," she said quietly. She glanced up at LaCroix, a cold cast returning to her eye. "We forgot you at first -- there was so much to see. And when we remembered and I wanted to come back for you--"

"There was no point," said LaCroix evenly. He stripped his gloves from his hands and tucked them into his belt. "We'd traveled half-a-day away. By the time we'd returned, the sun had set."

It was an excuse, but more than he'd been given so far. The darkness was falling away from him like fog dispersed by the rising sun -- they'd walking in the sunlight! "I was right," said Nicholas slowly. He studied LaCroix's face, expecting no apology but half-hoping that in this, at least, his master would relent and give him his due.

"You . . . were right." LaCroix's tight-lipped admission slid into a smile, then he extended his hand. "Come -- you still need to feed. Augsburg and his friends can do without me tonight; I'm in the mood for some amusement. Shall we go to the tavern?"

Nicholas could barely contain himself as he began to realize what this miracle of walking in the light might mean. He couldn't wait to get back upstairs, couldn't wait to return to the rest of Faust's papers, at which he'd barely glanced. For if the alchemist had been right about the light, what other secrets might reside in those dried sheets of parchment?

But there was still LaCroix to deal with, who looked upon the darkness as a patron saint or even lover. LaCroix always seemed to know what he was *thinking*, and if LaCroix knew what those papers contained, he'd destroy them. He'd stop at nothing to make Nicholas exactly as he was, a creature of the night, forever barred from the light.

Knowing this, Nicholas pushed back his elation, buried in within himself, but met LaCroix's near-apology with suspicion and just the faintest touch of surprise -- which wasn't hard to fake. Better that he pretend, that he comply with LaCroix's wishes. And then, when LaCroix and Janette had gone to feed, he'd read as many of the papers as he could and hide the rest, taking them into himself and his memory for later study.

There was a moment's hesitation on his part before he accepted LaCroix's assistance. In fact, it took more than a hand -- LaCroix supported his shoulder as he limped for a step or two. Glancing down at the dried blood smeared across the floor, LaCroix commented, "I was right, you *did* make a mess. Watch your step--"

Janette helped him cross the floor as well, until they reached the staircase. It was only wide enough for two abreast. She stepped back when Nicholas tried to place his good foot on the first step. LaCroix moved toward him, as if to carry him.

"I can do it," he said, brushing away LaCroix's hand, his pride wounded. But after the first step, he was glad enough to have LaCroix's arm beneath his shoulder, supporting him. Once they reached the main room, Nicholas limped to one of the hard, high-backed chairs and fell into it, suddenly exhausted.

LaCroix pulled up another chair across from him and leaned back, crossing his legs and resting his feet on the table top. As Nicholas carefully glanced around the room, he saw no sign of their fight the evening before . . . with the exception of a missing chair and a candle holder that had been replaced. The table had been righted and was piled high with tied bundles and packages-- a sign that Janette had spent at least some of the daylight she'd been given in visiting the merchants who did not keep hours past the setting of the sun. He'd left Faust's papers here, he remembering rescuing them from Janette just before LaCroix hit him with the chair . . .

Janette returned from wherever she'd gone to find some towels and a basin of water. She removed the shoe from his injured foot and carefully tore away a section of hose around his ankle.

"I might not make it to the tavern until tomorrow," said Nicholas, avoiding LaCroix's gaze and watching Janette at work. "You'd better go on without me -- Ow!" He winced and shifted in the seat as she dabbed at the blood and dirt.

In response, she slapped his knee lightly. "Be still," she scolded. "You should rest, anyway. Thinking of going to a tavern when you're so weak -- you men!"

"We'll bring you something back," said LaCroix, steepling his fingers. "If you promise not to neglect your needs again."

Nicholas smiled in response, but grabbed the arms of the chair and stiffened as Janette twisted his foot to set it right. As he rested, the coldness within him seemed to dissipate as half-formed plans jostled for his attention. There was so much he'd only glanced at in Faust's papers. Yes, he might have failed the light, but it hadn't failed him. If this miracle could happen once, it could happen again. And the next time he'd be ready for it, or any other miracles he might find.

"Looking for something?" asked LaCroix, eyeing him thoughtfully.

He swallowed, suddenly realizing that his thoughts were running too close to the surface. In trying not to meet LaCroix's gaze, he'd been studying the arrangement on the table a little too closely. Then again, if he pretended that he didn't care all that much . . .

"A leather pouch, about this large." Nicholas mimed the size with his hand, adding, "Since I'll be trapped here for the evening, I thought I might catch up on my reading."

"A leather pouch? Ah, yes. I think I remember--" LaCroix swung his legs from the table to the floor and stood. He walked along the edge of the table and rummaged through Janette's bundles, until he found a leather portfolio tied tightly with a thong. "This?" he asked, holding it aloft.

When Nicholas said, "Yes," -- heart in his throat -- LaCroix tossed it to him over the table.

Janette ducked, even though it came nowhere near her and Nicholas caught it easily. LaCroix laughed at her muttered oath, but she merely scowled and continued to work on Nicholas' foot, finally tying a towel into a light bandage. "There," she announced, after a moment's pause and a light proud tap against her handiwork. "If you feed well enough, you can take that off in an hour or so."

Nicholas gave his hand to her, helping her rise to her feet, then pressed the hand to his lips. "Thank you." She leaned toward him, retrieving her hand from his and pressing her own lips to his briefly, before picking up her bowl and dirty towels and heading for the door, humming beneath her breath.

"You manage to bring out something domestic in her," said LaCroix, his voice containing a note of puzzlement as he watched her leave. "I've yet to understand that."

Nicholas only half-heard the words. Despite the fact that the pouch seemed lighter than it had before, he was elated just to have it in his hands. For a moment, he hesitated opening it -- what if LaCroix should ask to see the papers? Better to leave it closed, place it by his chair and feign indifference until they left.

But his impatience won out. One look -- that was all he wanted. Just a brief glance at the studies of an accomplished alchemist, who had promised a day in the sun and delivered it. Then he could frown and tuck the papers back inside, set them aside and pretend boredom until LaCroix and Janette were otherwise occupied.

He threaded his way through the knotted leather thong and flipped open the flap, expecting to see the parchments as he'd last left them-- haphazardly crammed into the small space, but safe.

Instead . . . he found only blackened flakes. The warm glow within him was extinguished as solidly as the light from a candle at his discovery of the damage. He groaned, digging his hands into the pouch and finding only the crumbled and burned remnants of Faust's papers. They were gone, destroyed.

The light had been taken from him, again.

"That was the original, wasn't it?" asked LaCroix. As Nicholas glared up at him, eyes filled with hate, he smiled and picked up one of the bundles from the table, tossing it lightly from hand to hand. "I thought so."

"Why?" He planted his hands on either side of the chair and tried to lever himself to his feet, but his foot betrayed him, slipping out from beneath him. He would have crashed to the floor if LaCroix hadn't moved so quickly, catching him and easing him back into the chair.

Nicholas shrugged LaCroix's hand from his arm. "Why?" he demanded again, voice hoarse and his hand shaking with anger as he pointed toward the ashes that were now scattered across the floor.

"Because they were dangerous." LaCroix took a step back and pushed aside some of the ashes with the

toe of his boot. "You were right -- Faust was brilliant, Too brilliant. The world is safer with these secrets destroyed. You're safer."

"Me?" Nicholas hissed the word at him. If he could have moved away, he would, but his foot left him trapped in the chair. LaCroix took advantage of that, stalking up to him and towering over him.

"Yes, *you*. Until you learn there's no way back for you, no magical salvation," he gestured toward the ashes on the floor, "you'll never be content. You'll always be a danger to yourself. And us." He leaned both arms on the chair. "There's no more light, Nicholas. You're part of the darkness now. Accept it."

He met LaCroix's gaze, unable to speak the depths of his anger, unwilling to show the sorrow that had reached down into the dark place where his soul had once been. As their gazes locked, he realized that this time he had a weapon, a certainty of his own to use against LaCroix's damnable certitude that he was condemned to darkness--

"You walked in the light."

For a moment, LaCroix's expression changed -- he seemed ill-at-ease, disturbed by the thought. He looked down at his hand, touching the skin lightly, as if remembering the touch of the sun. Then he straightened quickly and took a step away. "Yes. Yes, I did, I have you to thank for that. Which is why you're not still chained down in that cellar." Almost absently, he fixed his cloak over his shoulders, then tapped the ashes from his boots. "Tell Janette to join me at the tavern when she's done. And to clean that up," he gestured toward the ashes on the floor. Turning on his heel, he stalked toward the door, saying, "Why must you *always* make such a mess?"

"What was it like?"

Nicholas hated himself for asking, hated himself for wanting to know. But after all that he had lost this day and night, that hesitation, that uncertainty in LaCroix might yet save him from utter desolation.

LaCroix paused in mid-step and turned his head. "The light?"

If he showed any interest, if he showed how much it meant to him, Nicholas knew that LaCroix would simply smile and turn away, leaving his question unanswered, refusing to give him that satisfaction, that hope. But he had no choice -- not when despair weighed so heavily upon his heart that he thought it might smother him. He met LaCroix's gaze and nodded, ever so slightly.

As he expected, LaCroix turned away again, but it was not a movement of dismissal and that snide smile with which he often signaled his victories didn't appear. LaCroix tilted his head, as if considering. "Interesting," he announced, after a moment's thought and a glance back at Nicholas. "Definitely . . . interesting." Then he continued to the door, slamming it shut behind him as he left.

With a sigh, Nicholas closed his eyes and leaned against the high-backed wooden chair. He ran his fingers around his wounded wrist -- the flesh was healing quickly, but it itched -- then opened his eyes wearily. 'Interesting.' He would have given anything for the light, even his life, and had failed. While LaCroix had walked in the sunlight and could only find it 'interesting.'

Two candles blazed on the table, the wan light dancing along the packages, casting odd, moving shadows. The ashes of the documents were scattered the length of the table. With a groan, he pushed himself from the chair, then lowered himself to his knees. Nicholas crawled to the leather portfolio and began to scoop

the ashes back inside, as best as he could manage. It was something to do, something with which to occupy himself, something to keep him from thinking about the light.

And about that cold, empty darkness that now filled his entire being.

Chapter 8

Nick paused for a moment in the hospital corridor, his sensitive hearing picking up the sounds of conversation from inside -- a female voice, in addition to Kevin's. He swallowed, at first fearing it might be Janette, but a moment's concentration told him otherwise. Janette was near, but there was someone else in the room.

The door to the room was ajar. He rapped on it lightly with his knuckles and took a step inside. "Am I intruding?" he asked. "Because if I am--?"

He recognized the woman instantly -- she'd been the subject of a number of Kevin's sketches. She was as lithe and lively in three dimensions as she'd been in two, her smile hesitant as he entered. She rose from her seat, as Kevin said, "Nick? No, it's okay, come on in. This is Gina. Gina, this is Detective Knight."

"Hi." He extended his hand, shaking hers and adding, "That's Nick. It's good to meet you. Kevin's said something about you."

Gina's smile was still shy, as she glanced back at Kevin, who was grinning. "Yeah, well, Kevin said something about you, too." Some part of Nick's heart froze at her words -- he wondered for a moment whether Kevin had kept his promise not to say anything about Janette's visit, until she added, "You're an artist, as well as a cop, huh?"

The tension eased and he ran his hand along the back of his neck. "Strictly amateur," he admitted. "Nowhere near Kevin's standards."

Her brown eyes sparkled with pride as she took Kevin's hand. "Yeah, he's pretty good," she admitted. "Don't tell him too often. Won't be able to get him through the apartment door if his head gets any bigger." But there was a catch in her voice as she looked down at Kevin and Nick almost thought he saw a tear sparkle in the corner of her eye. "I -- uh -- guess I'd better go. You guys probably want to talk cop stuff or something."

"No," said Nick quickly, taking a step toward the door. "Really, I can come back later--"

Gina shook her head. "It's okay -- I've got lots of stuff to do. Kevin's coming home by the end of the week and I've got a lot of stuff to get ready."

"Ready?" asked Nick

Kevin's bed was raised slightly, so that he was seated upright. He held tightly to Gina's hand as he grinned. "Yeah -- Dr. Merrick sent someone by, a counselor. He's got some great ideas on making the adjustment easier. We've got a couple more sessions with him, then they're letting me go."

Gina leaned over and kissed Kevin, "See you, honey."

"Okay. Later." His fingers released hers reluctantly, his hand resting on the bed as she left it.

She straightened for a moment as she looked down at him, then seemed to notice Nick again and extended her hand. "Nice to meet you, detective."

"Same here." He folded his hand over hers, adding, "You need anything, you call us. Especially if Kevin starts giving you a hard time."

"Count on it," she answered, with a lop-sided grin. But there was a moment when she looked back at Kevin that he saw a trace of fear in her eyes. And as she turned and left the room, her steps were hurried.

Nick followed her to the door, then closed it behind her. On an impulse, he drew a chair beneath the knob, so that it couldn't be opened easily, then walked back to the bed. "How are you feeling? Your voice sounds better."

"Pretty good. Every day in every way, huh?" Then Kevin cleared his throat and Nick saw his hand clutch at the edge of the blanket. "Is -- uh -- *she* here?"

"Not yet--" But his words were countered by a tap against the window. "Speak of the lady." Nick walked over to the blinds and pushed them aside, then opened the window as he had the night before.

"How *dare* you leave me out there with those filthy pigeons!" said Janette, as he helped her into the room. Her voice was still quiet, so that only he could hear her, but Nick was well aware that her anger was directed less at the pigeons *than* at *him*. As she smoothed down the nurse's uniform, she glanced at Kevin and asked sharply, "Have you told him?"

Nick frowned at her and opened his mouth to reply, but Kevin started speaking.

"Look," he said, voice hesitant. "I want to thank you. *Both* of you. You saved my life last night."

Janette hurried to the bed and seated herself beside him. She took her hand in his. "That's nothing compared to what we can give you. Eternal life--"

"Eternal death," said Nick, moving to the other side of the bed.

Janette glared at him, then looked back to Kevin. "The return of your sight."

"Constant darkness."

"You're *not* helping," she hissed beneath her breath, so that Kevin couldn't hear her.

"He need to know what he's being offered," said Nick in a normal tone of voice. "There's more to it than just that. Much more. I didn't understand. He *has* to."

Kevin reached up his hand to Nick. After a second, and a glance from Janette, Nick took Kevin's hand in his. "I understand," said Kevin. "It's okay. I've thought about what you said last night. I've... thought about it a lot."

Janette hissed lightly and glanced at Nick again, worry in her eyes. But Kevin squeezed her hand, saying, "I haven't told anybody -- I swear. It's all been a dream. I was dreaming last night. Just like I'm dreaming

now. None of it ever happened."

Nick held Kevin's hand tightly, even as Janette released her hold on him and rose to her feet. "You don't want it," said Nick, surprised at a sudden wave of pride that swept through him, on Kevin's behalf.

"I'm grateful for the offer. But . . . there's Gina. We're getting married in a year and she told me she's not about to give up on me." He laughed low in his throat. "Guess love *is* blind after all, huh?"

Janette had turned her back to them. "What about your art?" she asked sharply.

"I've been thinking about that, too." Kevin took a breath. "I can't see, but there's still lots of stuff in my head that wants out. I've just got to find a different way to say the stuff I use to draw or paint." He cleared his throat and turned his head as if guessing where she was standing. "It won't be easy. But I've had a lot of time to think. Haven't done much *but* think. And I think -- maybe it's all part of the plan. Who am I to go screwing around with it? What's gonna happen is gonna happen."

"Plan? Plan?" Janette turned, her lips twisted in a frown. "*What* plan?"

Nick almost laughed at her confusion. "Divine plan. Or something like it." He wrapped his hands around Kevin's with a sense of wonder. "He's got faith. Or hope. He doesn't need us."

"Faith? In what? A God that would let something like this happen?" She paced angrily at the foot of the bed, gesturing toward Kevin. "What good will faith do him, without his art? Will the girl support him, earn his 'daily bread'?"

Kevin winced at her words, but his voice remained steady. "What you said last night about giving up Gina -- I couldn't do that. Okay, so maybe I'm not a religious person. But there's Gina. She's got faith in us. I've got faith in her. We'll make it through."

Janette stalked to Nick and tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned, releasing Kevin's hand, she grabbed his jacket collar. She dragged him aside, whispering, "You have to do something. You have to make him change his mind. Or -- you'll have to kill him."

"No," answered Nick firmly, wrenching her hand from his collar. "There's another way."

"There *is* no other way to ensure his silence." She folded her arms and tapped her foot. He saw her fingers move to her mouth and she bit her nails, as if trying to fulfill the craving for a cigarette. "He knows our secrets. You can't make him forget."

"We won't have to." Nick clamped his hand on her shoulder and pulled her back to the bed. "Kevin," he said aloud, "you understand -- you can't tell anyone about this. For our sake . . . and yours."

Kevin froze in the bed and swallowed, his head turning toward Nick. "Are you . . . going to kill me?"

"No." Nick gave Janette a sharp glance as she hissed angrily, willing her to remain silent. "No, but others might. Unless you stay quiet. No one can ever know, not even Gina. And . . . you can't change your mind. We can't make this offer again."

There was the briefest hesitation on Kevin's part, then he shook his head. "No -- no thanks. Like I said, it's all been a dream. That's all it is and that's all it's ever been."

Janette snarled, but Nick caught her arm and brought her close to him. They stood nose to nose for a moment and the golden eyes and fangs she showed brought out the beast in him, as well. Their gazes locked.

"You never intended on following through," she accused, not bothering to lower her voice. "There's no way I'll allow--"

"You will!" Nick matched snarl for snarl and she backed up a step, but he drew her close again. "Would I ever intentionally put you in danger? I'm trusting Kevin with my life . . . and yours." He turned his head for a moment, fighting back the beast, trying to regain control of himself. When he looked back at her, he saw that her eyes were blue as well, but filled with gold specs and her fangs were still in place. "Trust me," he whispered. "This is right. Believe me."

"Believe you?" She glanced over her shoulder at Kevin, then back at Nick. "Believe you?"

For an instant, he thought he saw her eyes soften and the touch of a bitter smile on her lips. But if it had happened at all, for he couldn't say that he'd actually seen it, her eyes were instantly cold and angry again. "I can't believe this!" declared Janette. Pulling her arm from Nick's grasp, she tore the nurse's hat from her head and slapped him in the chest with it. "You -- I don't want to talk to you. And *you!*" She turned toward Kevin and said snippily, "I hope you and your little fiancée are very happy. *Do* send me an invitation to the wedding -- if you can ever find her."

Whirling on her heel, she started toward the door. Nick intercepted her and pointed toward the window. With a snarl and show of fangs, she stalked back to the windowsill, pushing away his attempts to help, until she disappeared outside and into the night.

Nick crushed the nurse's hat in his hand and tucked it into his pocket, watching Janette float upward to the roof of the building wrapped in the black cloak, from where she could fly away, unseen. She'd given in, or given up . . . neither of which was an action common to Janette's nature, unless faced with odds she knew she couldn't overcome.

"Is she *very* beautiful?" asked Kevin

He continued to stare out the window, wondering just how long it would take her to forgive him this little episode. "Beautiful? Oh . . . yes."

"And angry. Guess I pissed her off big time."

Smiling, Nick walked back to the bed and sat down beside Kevin. "She'll get over it. She just hates missing out on a free meal."

Kevin swallowed. "She wants me dead, doesn't she?"

"It's a matter of self-protection." Nick looked down at his hand, then glanced back over his shoulder, toward the window. "She won't touch you as long as you're silent, I'll see to that. But I've got to warn you, she has a pretty long memory."

"Thanks. I -- I won't let you down. Either of you."

"Right." Nick slapped his hand against Kevin's, then rose from the bed and headed toward the door. "You

need anything, let me know."

"Okay. Bye, Nick."

"Yeah. Good luck, Kevin."

He'd almost reached the door and the chair that held it when Kevin called to him again. "Hey -- I wish . . . I wish I'd gotten to see your paintings."

Nick paused, half-turning. "Yeah. So do I."

"You said they were abstracts?"

"Yeah."

"So maybe you could talk them to me. Tell me what they look like. When I'm up and around, I could visit . . ."

Nick looked back at the window, remembering Janette's exit. "That might-- that might not be such a good idea."

Kevin took a breath. "Yeah. I guess. But -- abstracts, huh?" He placed his arms beneath his head, as if he were staring at the ceiling. "Any theme?"

"Sunrises."

"Sunrises," repeated Kevin softly.

He was so quiet for a moment, Nick almost thought he'd fallen asleep. And then he realized that Kevin was thinking about his abstract paintings, trying to envision works he'd never seen. It rubbed that raw spot inside him, that yearning to recapture some of what he'd lost. He almost took a step toward the bed, but stopped himself.

No, he didn't dare. He was right in saying that it wasn't such a good idea. With what Kevin knew about him, about Janette, it would be safer for him to leave Kevin to deal with his own problems in peace, without further interference.

Nick turned toward the door again and pushed away the chair. His hand was on the doorknob when Kevin added, "It never goes away, you know."

"What?"

"The light." Kevin was still staring at the ceiling, staring at eternity through those bandages. "It doesn't really go away. I mean, I know I can't see it, but just because I can't see it doesn't mean it's not there. It's inside. It's always light for me, now." He cleared his throat. "Don't give up on it, okay? It'll be there for you, someday. It's just . . . waiting, that's all."

Now it was Nick's turn to swallow. He closed his eyes for a moment, wanting desperately to see some spark of light within himself. And -- wonder of wonders -- there was a flicker. The cold, dark place was still there, but at the very center was a small spot of light. It didn't last long, but it was there, had been there.

And might be there again.

"Good-bye, Kevin," he said aloud, as he opened the door and slipped into the hall. It wasn't until he was too far away to be heard that he added to himself, in a voice too soft for any mortal to hear, "Thanks for the light."

Chapter 9

Nick smoothed the paper against the dining table with his hand as the elevator door opened. He paused when Natalie entered, gave her a brief, "Hi," then went back to his task. It was all a matter of concentration -- do it right the first time.

She walked toward him, her bag slung over her shoulder, still wearing her work clothes. "Oh, that's new. Can I--?"

Natalie was gesturing toward the watercolor Kevin had given him. "Go ahead," said Nick. Reaching over, he handed the matted picture to her. Then he carefully picked up the drawing Kevin had done for him in the hospital room and rice-taped it to the backing board of the frame.

"This is beautiful." Holding the piece by the edges, Natalie walked it back to him, then looked over his shoulder. "That's the sketch Kevin made when--"

"Yeah." He ran his finger down the edge of the tape lightly to fix it in place, a lump rising in his throat at the thought of what this sketch had cost Kevin. Then he glanced up at her with an embarrassed grin. "Yeah. Um -- if I could have that--?"

"Oh, sure." She handed him back the matted watercolor.

He placed it into the open ended frame, covering Kevin's attempt at the suspect sketch, then held the edges of the frame together. Using a screwdriver, he pushed on the small nails at the edge of the frame, sealing everything in place, then held up the piece for Natalie's critique. "What do you think?"

"I think it's gorgeous." She glanced down at him, then back at the picture. "But you can't see the sketch."

"You're not supposed to. It's a reminder . . . for me." He walked over to a spot near the window, where he'd already drilled in bolts, then adjusted the picture so that it hung properly. Nick took a step back, hands on hips, and Natalie joined him.

"Reminder?"

"That just because you can't see something, it doesn't mean it's not there." He gave the picture a nod of approval, then walked back to the table and tossed the framing scraps into a small leather pouch.

Natalie cleared her throat as she stared at the picture, then she turned to face him. "Am I -- um -- missing something here?"

"Private joke."

"Okay." She pursed her lips and walked past him, down to the far end of the table, which was covered with notebook paper and what appeared to be star charts. Flipping through them idly, she asked, "How

is Kevin?

"Fine, as far as I know," he answered, replacing the set of tools into a leather pouch, then zipping it closed. "He should be going home in a few days."

"He should be going--" Natalie bit her lip and watched him. When Nick only smiled lightly in response, she slapped her hand down on the table, which got his attention.

He looked up, startled. "What?"

"Give!"

His eyes widening, he assumed an innocent expression. "Give what?"

"You know very well what," said Natalie angrily. "The last time I see you, you're talking about turning Kevin into a vampire so he can see again. Then I hear that you've caught the suspect in the case. And I show up here and you're framing a picture like nothing's happened, then you tell me Kevin's going home?"

Somehow, Nick managed to maintain the innocent look. "Yeah. So?"

"Grrrrrr!" Natalie walked toward him, punched him lightly in his chest a few times with her fists as if sparring with him, then stalked away, shaking her head. "You can be *so* maddening at times!"

"All right, all right," he relented, raising his hands in defeat. Nick walked over and seated himself on the couch. "I surrender." He looked down at the floor for a moment, clasped his hands together, then looked up at her. "You were right. I gave Kevin the choice."

"And?" asked Natalie, sliding into the chair across from him, concerned.

"He decided not to accept the offer." Nick looked down at his hands again. "I made sure he knew everything, all the stuff I didn't know."

"And he turned you down?" asked Natalie again, a hint of approval in her tone.

Nick looked up sharply. "You don't have to sound so happy about it."

"Well, you are." When he hesitated, she leaned across and tapped his shoulder. "Come on, admit it."

"Yeah," he said, after a pause and smiling. "Yeah, I am. Relieved, more than anything else." He rose from the couch and took a step away. "At first, I really thought he was going to go through with it. But once he'd had a chance to think about it . . . it made a difference. He has a fiancée -- Gina."

"He didn't tell her?" asked Natalie, when Nick didn't continue.

He was staring at the fireplace, remembering Kevin's smile when he talked about Gina. "Hm? Oh -- no. He didn't tell anybody. But it was something between them -- she had faith in him. It seemed to make all the difference. It was like, well, he could handle it, so long as Gina was around. So long as there was somebody there who believed in him. I -- I didn't have that."

"When you were . . . brought across."

Nick looked over at her and smiled slightly. "When I was brought across."

She smiled back, then after a minute, sighed and rose to her feet. "Well, guess I'll head home. I just stopped by to see how you were doing."

"Uh -- wait. Could you -- uh -- wait, just a minute?" Nick held up his hand and when she stopped in surprise, he ran around the couch and over to the table. She followed, curious, as he spread out the notebook paper and maps. "I wanted to ask you--" he ran his finger down one of the scribbled notations, then tapped on one, "could you check your calendar for me, tell me if you've got something planned?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure." Natalie dropped her shoulder bag to the table and opened it, then withdrew a small date book from her purse. "What time?"

"All day."

"All day," she looked up at him suspiciously, then flipped open her calendar. "What day?"

"May 16th."

"May 16th?" Natalie looked down at her calendar, then up at him. "But it's *June*."

"Not this year," said Nick. "Wait a second--" Again, he looked from a chart to one of his papers, then closed his eyes, calculating. Opening his eyes, he looked up at her and said, "1997."

"Oh, 1997." Natalie glanced down at her calendar, then stared at him, startled. "1997? Nick?"

He planted his palms firmly on the table top and stared back at her. "May 16th, 1997. Do you have any plans?"

"1997?" Natalie laughed. "No! What on earth are you--?"

"Good." Grinning, Nick ran past her and picked up the telephone. He hit the autodial for the police station number and turned his back to her. The phone rang twice before someone picked up.

"Metro Police, twenty-seventh division, can I--?"

"Norma, this is Nick Knight." He glanced over at Natalie. "Has that vacation schedule gone downtown yet?"

"I don't think so Nick. Let me check--" He heard Norma ask someone a question, then she returned to the phone. "No, it's still here. Don't tell me you want to make a change?"

"Not for this year," he said, stealing another glance at Natalie, who looked very confused. "I wanted to know how far in advance I can book time."

"Well, since you've got some seniority, if you've got a week or something for next year, we can put a hold in for you now."

"Good," he answered. "Try May 16, 1997."

"May 16th, 19-- did you say 1997?"

"Yep, 1997." He grinned at Natalie as she raised an eyebrow. "Do me a favor and hold onto the Coroner's Office schedule when it comes through for a double-check. Natalie Lambert wants to be penciled in too, okay?"

"Natalie Lambert?" Norma's voice held more than a tint of suspicion. "Nick, is this something we should know about?"

"Just pencil her in for me, okay. She'll call later to confirm. Thanks, Norma. I owe you." Nick hung up the phone and dropped it into the cradle, then rubbed his hands together. "There. It's done."

"What's done?" asked Natalie. Frowning, she stalked toward him, finger pointed in his direction. "Nick, I swear if you don't tell me--"

He held up in hands, surrendering again. "Okay, okay -- what if I told you that on May 16th, 1997, I'll be able to walk in the sunlight?"

Natalie paused in mid-step. She tilted her head and eyed him suspiciously. "A cure?"

"Not a cure. One day. Being able to walk in sunlight." He walked toward her and put his hands on her shoulder. "What would you say?"

"Are you sure? I mean, it's crazy--"

"Yes, I know." Staring into her eyes, he asked, "What would you say?"

"1997? We may have a cure by then . . ."

"But if we don't?" When she hesitated, still watching him cautiously, he asked, "You *do* believe me?"

"Of *course* I believe you." She frowned for a moment and shook her head. "Well, at least we've got three years to plan something--"

"We?"

"What do you think? *We*," she said, as he backed away and she punched him in the shoulder. "You think I'm going to let you out on a daylight stroll all by yourself?" She made a disbelieving noise as she walked past him, picking up her purse on the way. "There's the beach -- May's a little early though," she corrected, heading for the elevator. "We could take a drive in the Caddy, with the top *down*. We could go . . . somewhere. Hell, we can take the day tour of Toronto!" declared Natalie cheerfully. She stepped into the elevator, then held the door open. "I'll need a camera. *And* film. You'll need some serious sunblock. This'll take a lot of planning," she admitted, sobering.

Her momentary frown worried him. "But . . . you'll be there?"

Natalie grinned. "Wouldn't miss it for the world." As she let the door close, he heard her still muttering to herself, making lists of what she'd need, or places to go and things to do.

He found himself mirroring her grin. She was right -- there'd be a lot to do before then, experiments to

try, cures to find, disappointments to weather. But knowing that he'd have that promised day in the sun might make it easier to endure the disappointments, to keep trying until something worked. Until he was brought back into the light and life.

Nick glanced around, suddenly realizing he had some unfinished business. He walked over to the canvas he'd started -- it was covered with a protective drop cloth. For a long moment he simply stared at the white covering, then he tore it away, not wanting to prolong the agony of not knowing how bad it actually was.

And, as he looked at it, he realized that it wasn't as bad as he'd thought. There *was* too much red in it and it looked nothing like what he'd first conceived . . . but -- he managed a wan smile -- it wasn't a total disappointment. Of course, it wasn't finished yet . . .

On impulse, Nick walked over to his work table and hunted through his brushes for something with a fine, tapered point. It didn't matter that he hadn't changed, getting paint on his clothing wasn't really an issue as he gathered together his paints and squeezed tube after tube onto his palette. Somehow, he knew exactly what he needed. There were no false starts, no guesses -- he mixed the paint on instinct, the colors blending and combining exactly as he expected.

It took only four strokes with the brush to do what he knew had to be done, to give the painting what it lacked. Another stroke of that white-gold just as a touch-up . . . and then he found himself signing the painting with the bold color of sunlight, the brush racing across the canvas and ending with a flourish.

He'd been right . . . it *was* a dark picture, filled with the colors of dried blood and old wood, the blacks and deep grays and somber burnt reds of shadows that fell against stone and brick. But near the edge, almost beyond the canvas, was that small line of white-gold, peeking out from behind the darkness with a shy intensity. It wasn't much, but it was there, a reassuring brilliance amidst the darkness. The light *was* there. It had only been waiting for him to find it.

With a triumphant whoop, he tossed the palette and brush down to the work table and took a few steps back to view the painting. Then Nick caught sight of the watercolor hanging on the wall -- Kevin's painting -- and walked over to it. He stood there, enraptured, caught by the beauty of the light, Kevin's light. No matter how long he painted, how long he lived, he'd never be good enough to capture *that* light.

But he'd managed to recapture a little of his own. He'd get his chance to walk in the sunlight. Until then, at least, he had the painting -- both paintings -- to remind him that the light hadn't gone away, that it was still waiting for him.

And that there was someone who believed in him enough to help him find it again.

The End

About the Authors (and Staff) . . .

☛ **Don Bassingthwaite** (d.bassingthw@genie.geis.com) lives for parody! A fantasy writer living in Toronto, he wishes that *Forever Knight* were actually shown in the city where it is shot and set. Not that it matters, because he wouldn't have time to watch anyway. Who knows what silliness lurks in the hearts of men . . .

☛ **Allen Braunsdorf** (ab@nova.cc.purdue.edu) (who invariably shortens either the first or last name to one letter) is a computer programmer by trade and a writer, video game designer and computer artist by avocation. Seen rarely in person, but often on the Net, ab resides in the Purdue University area enjoying a self-proclaimed "no-stress technodecadent lifestyle."

☛ **Diane Echelbarger** is a 35 year old spinster who shares a small Edwardian house in Stoughton, WI with two pushy cats. Her interests include historical costuming, mystery novels, and paying off her mortgage. She can be found lurking at gryphon@earth.execpc.com.

☛ **Susan M. Garrett** (susang@vitinc.com) is a writer by inclination and not by trade (which is a nice way of saying she's an amateur). She has a real-life, grown-up job as the Assistant Director of MIS for the Township of Dover. She generally plays well with others and likes to infect other people with the damnable 'writing bug.'

☛ **Sharon Himmanen** (romana@pipeline.com) is currently working on her dissertation in biopsychology at the City University of New York. She also works as a research technician at the Laboratory for Comparative Cognition at Lehman College. When she's not doing either of those she spends far too much time on the internet.

☛ **Celeste Hotaling-Lyons** (celeste_hotaling-lyons@iqj.com) has been involved in 'fandom' since 1975, when she attended her first *Star Trek* convention as an over-awed young high school student. Realizing that the best zine is a free zine, she began sending cartoons to various *Star Wars* zines in the late '70s. Since then many other (usually humorous) stories, illustrations and poems followed, in many different fandoms. She and husband Robert Lyons own a comic-book shop in Waterbury, CT and in turn are owned by three cats: Mad Max, Newt and Indy Jones.

✓ **Valery King** (kingv@ccmail.orst.edu, merano@aol.com) catalogs maps and other stuff for Oregon State University, and does some singing for local choirs, theater groups and opera companies on the side. A secret masochist, she also trolls through the *many, many* posts on FKFIC-L for some good stuff to put in this zine, and winds up having to make the difficult decision on what good stuff she has to leave out. She lives in an extended family, with two sisters, three teenagers (*not hers!*), two terriers and six cats (including new kitten Benton Fraser--no, she will *not* do a *Due South* zine!)

☛ **Lynne Levine** (llevine@MIT.EDU) works as a secretary at MIT, where she spends way too much time on the internet. She is a long-time member of the Gaylaxians Science Fiction Society, where she became known as "The Queen of Dead Shows" because the TV shows she liked were almost always cancelled soon after she started watching them. That title was revised to "The Queen of Dead and Undead Shows" after *Forever Knight* was resurrected for first-run syndication.

☛ **Margaret Newman** (margaret@cs.arizona.edu) works at the University of Arizona Computer Science Department as a secretary. She is a part of "Stitching Buddies" which is a new cross stitch network complete with round robins and a newsletter. Margaret lives with two dogs, two cats, a canary, and a Mac.

☛ **Maria E. Orive** (orive@bscr.uga.edu) is a theoretical-population-geneticist -sometimes-fanfic-author who currently splits her time between Athens, Georgia, where she works for the Department of Genetics at the University of Georgia, and Berkeley, California, where her husband works and lives. She is accompanied on her travels by Holly Golightly, a black cat who is definitely a Ravenette.

☛ **Pamela Rush** (PKRUSH01@UKCC.UKY.EDU) is currently chained to a desk in a mid-southern university, but she is considering a career change to short-order souvlaki chef. She is proud to be an A-negative FoD (Friend of Don [Schanke]).

☛ **Sharon Scott** (sss44@aol.com) is the Special Collections Catalog Librarian at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. An avid fan of *Forever Knight* and Geraint Wyn Davies, she's also interested in rock & blues, Sting, quilting, cats, Pokes, vampires . . .

☛ **Siobhan** (hypatia@drycas.club.cc.cmu.edu) lives with three housemates, four cats, one hellhound, and two fish in a suburb of Washington, D.C. She can usually be found in one of that area's many Irish pubs, singing the choruses (off-key) along with the bands until the pint glass is pried from her hand and she's sent home by the barman. Though she's often armed with a bodhran and should be considered dangerous, she can be easily placated with Godiva dark chocolate bars with raspberry filling.

☛ **Diane Trap** (trap@rhett.libs.uga.edu) is a reference librarian at the University of Georgia. She drives a car with standard transmission, and can't see those '3-D' pictures either.

